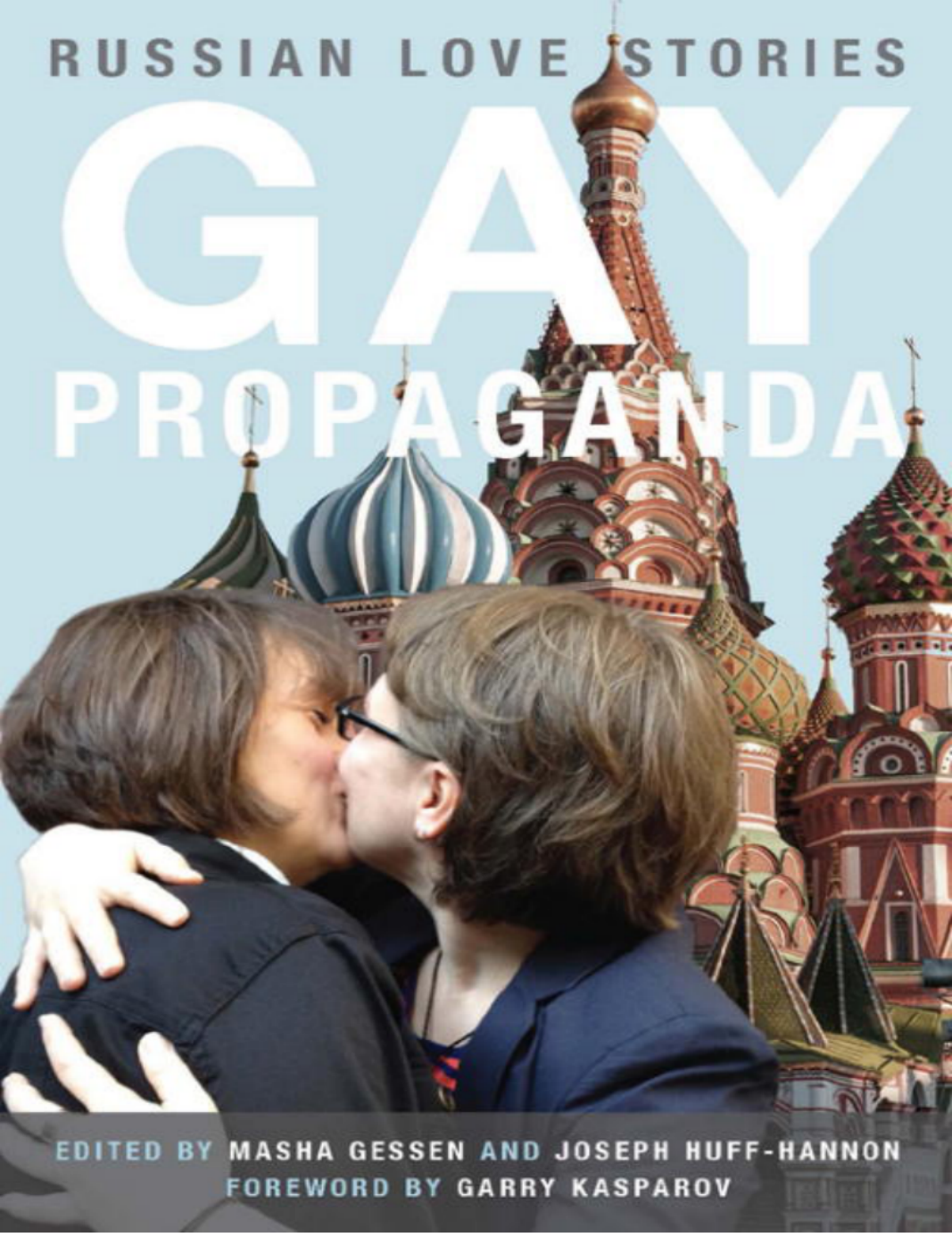
RUSSIAN LOVE STORIES

GAY PROPAGANDA



EDITED BY MASHA GESSEN AND JOSEPH HUFF-HANNON

FOREWORD BY GARRY KASPAROV

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Annotation

Gay Propaganda brings together original stories, interviews and testimonials to capture the lives and loves of LGBT Russians living both in Russia and in exile today. It is an intentionally provocative riposte to Russia's recently passed and ill-defined ban on "homosexual propaganda."

As part of a strategy to consolidate political control in Russia following massive pro-democracy protests that shook the government, President Vladimir Putin decided it needed an enemy to unite the country. The Kremlin opted to demonize gays and lesbians. In June 2013 Putin signed a bill banning the "propaganda" of so-called non-traditional relationships. Predictably, in the months that followed, anti-gay attacks spread across Russia.

The stories gathered in *Gay Propaganda* offer a timely and intimate window into the hardships faced by Russians on the receiving end of state-sanctioned homophobia, as well as the the humor, passion, and resilience people show in the face of adversity. Here are stories of men and women in long-term committed relationships as well as those still looking for love; of those raising kids or negotiating difficult family dynamics; of those facing the challenges of continuing to live in Russia or joining a rapidly growing exodus.

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GAY PROPAGANDA
RUSSIAN LOVE STORIES
Edited by Masha Gessen and Joseph Huff-Hannon

FOREWORD

Russia has been sliding steadily into dictatorship since Vladimir Putin first came to power in 2000. Along with the crackdown at home, Putin's Russia has become an active force for corruption and despotism well beyond its borders. But when it comes to standing up to Putin, leaders and pundits of the West alternate between indifference and feigned helplessness—so it's a rare moment when an issue cuts through this cycle.

To paraphrase Tolstoy's opening line in *Anna Karenina*: all dictatorships are unhappy in their own way. Putin's Russia is not the USSR, but the fact that Russians are free to leave doesn't mean they are free. Putin is no Hitler, but even though no one can be compared to the Nazi monster of World War II, there are important lessons to learn from how Hitler was enabled by his own people and the world when he was merely an esteemed leader in the 1930s. Perhaps such lessons are just too painful.

Dictatorships also have many things in common, and patterns are repeated from place to place and era to era, as each generation of autocrats seeks to abolish individual freedom and hold on to power at all costs. These regimes become less effective as they run out of positive agenda items and so must pursue purely negative ones. This isn't merely a matter of power corrupting, or the rare tyrant with benevolent intentions failing to fulfill the needs and desires of his subjects. The problem is, simply put, a lack of communication with the people. An authoritarian administration may competently enact an initial plan or resolve an existing crisis, but without the feedback loop of democracy, moral and intellectual stagnation is inevitable. In Putin's Russia this point was passed long ago, with the instability and violence of the Yeltsin years used as a pretext to crack down on every sort of political and personal freedom.

Another shared characteristic of authoritarian regimes is how they respond to that lack of a positive agenda by creating enemies against which they can bravely protect the citizenry. These enemies, internal and external, are also inevitably to blame for many of the nation's ills, but scapegoating is not an essential element. Fear mongering and hatred are good enough to start, and when backed by a massive propaganda campaign, they can be effective in distracting people from the real problems of the economy, security, and lack of a voice in the face of oppression.

The best enemies are those against whom historical conflicts can be resuscitated. For a KGB man like Putin and his clique, it's been most natural to drum up anti-Americanism, preying on old Cold War

memories. Another popular target are those members of society who cannot effectively fight back, the outsiders and minorities who are already under great pressure due to the decay of civil society. Here Putin has again followed the old playbook by attacking Russia's fragile gay community, both officially with discriminatory laws, and unofficially by failing to protect them from harassment and violence.

In a curious twist of fate, one of Putin's grandiose pet projects has brought this pathetic assault into the global spotlight. The 2014 Sochi Winter Olympic Games, a festival of corruption and cronyism intended to highlight Putin's power and wealth, has instead drawn attention to this institutionalized bigotry, and the attack on free speech promulgated by Russia's "anti-gay-propaganda" laws. It's a delicious irony that two practices historically beloved by dictators—hosting big international events and persecuting minorities—have again collided in this fashion. The 1936 Berlin Games served as a showcase for Nazi power, and their unchallenged success boosted Hitler's confidence in his ambitious plans. Though Jesse Owens refuted Nazi racial theory in the heart of Germany at the 1936 Olympics, Owens' personal heroics weren't matched by the many world leaders who fawned over Hitler and his well-orchestrated spectacle.

To avoid a repeat of this in Sochi, the free world must unconditionally condemn the abuses of the Putin regime. Gay rights are human rights, and when the LGBT community suffers for their very existence, we all suffer. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Russian Constitution, and even the Olympic Charter prohibit discrimination of the sort being carried out against gay Russians today. The environment of polarization and hostility created by these unjust laws, as well as the cynical courting of the Russian Orthodox Church by the Putin regime in these culture wars, is poisoning the soul of the country.

Gay and lesbian Russians who are able to do so are fleeing the country, as are so many others. Intellectuals, liberals, entrepreneurs, out-of-favor ethnicities and religions: all have become targets, and Putin is happy to be rid of these "enemies of the state." Brain drain and the disappearance of the educated creative class are not seen as a problem for the pipeline economy Putin has created. In the end, this is his greatest crime of all, turning Russia against Russians who love their country and who want little more than for it to be a strong and free place to live and to raise a family.

—Garry Kasparov

Tallinn, Estonia

December 14, 2013

INTRODUCTION
by Masha Gessen and Joseph Huff-Hannon

JOSEPH

This book started with a romance that sounded unreal, told to me in broad strokes by Tatiana, a shy Russian woman whom I met over the summer. I'm a sucker for a good love story.

We were at a picnic in a park overlooking the East River in Queens, NY, enjoying cold beet soup, Russian pastries, and plenty of wine. The picnic had been put together by a group of Russian and Russian-speaking activists, some of whom had been causing headlines lately for organizing vodka dumps and other disruptive protest actions around town. The global news media was starting to pay attention to Russia's role as host country to the most expensive and, some feared, most homophobic Olympic Games in history. The controversy was also contributing to the growth of a tight-knit, increasingly visible, outspoken community of gay and lesbian Russian émigrés and exiles in New York and elsewhere.

It was Tatiana's first time joining this crowd, mine as well, and I asked her why she was here. "I'm married now, so I know what it feels like to have the same rights as everybody else. I can't just sit here and not do anything while things are moving backward where I'm from."

Tatiana met her wife Ana online, and despite living on almost opposite sides of the earth at the time, they carried on an intense correspondence for months before finally rendezvousing in Moscow for a brief but unforgettable first meeting. The two fell in love, moved in with each other in New York, had a daughter, and after almost a decade together, were married shortly after the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the Defense of Marriage Act.

That picnic was a month or two after President Putin signed a now infamous ban on the "propaganda of non-traditional lifestyles," an ill-defined piece of legislation making it a crime to give equal merit to gay relationships, distribute any materials referencing gay rights, or to use the media or the Internet to "promote" (to report on) the lives and romances of LGBT people. The love lives of people like Tatiana, who found an intercontinental romance both extravagant in origin and everyday in its domesticity, were now considered "illegal propaganda" in Russia, and especially if told within earshot, or mouse click, of a minor. Tatiana's own daughter, for example.

In the stroke of a pen, the inner lives of millions of citizens in a

vast, diverse country of over 140 million people across nine time zones were now banned, legally shoved back into the shadows after a slow but steady thaw following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Bullshit. But also strategically brilliant if you take its intent and its consequences at face value: to whip up cheap, crude populism against a minority who can't fight back in the media in a country with legendary corruption and a newly mobilized civil society movement that the government is desperate to crush. To make it next to impossible for queer people in Russia to demand equal rights, or even be heard or seen in the public square. To make it illegal for gay men and women to have any representation in television, art, film, or any other medium that reaches the masses. And to make it impossible to publish a book about Russian men and women, living very Russian lives, savoring, seeking, and sometimes suffering through very Russian loves. It made a book like this feel inevitable, necessary, and urgent.

So when the idea began to take shape, and as I wondered how I could possibly pull it off from thousands of miles away, my first ideal co-conspirator was Masha, whose work I'd been following and whose reputation I knew. I remembered that my curly-haired Russian friend Boris was a distant cousin, wrangled her contact information out of him, and sent her a long note about the idea behind this book, a collection of real, contemporary Russian love stories.

We'd call it *Gay Propaganda*.

MASHA

I was not very nice. I did not need another project. And I didn't need another well-intentioned American suggesting a way to educate the Russian public, based on the good-hearted but thoroughly misguided notion that if only the Russian people knew more gays and lesbians, all of this would go away. What a load of crap.

Our problem was not public homophobia; our problem was the Kremlin, which had launched a campaign against us, the quintessential "foreign agent," the ultimate Other. Patriarch Kirill, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, had said the growing international trend toward legalizing same-sex marriage was a sign of the coming Apocalypse.

A leading commentator on Channel 1, which beams into 98% of Russian households, recorded a series of segments explaining that LGBT people are the Antichrist. The Number Two person in the state broadcasting establishment hosted a show on the question of whether banning "homosexual propaganda" was enough and opined that it was not: *"We must also ban blood and sperm donations by them. And if they should die in car accidents, we need to bury their hearts underground or burn them, for they are unsuitable for the aiding of a human life."*

It was classic war rhetoric—showing gay people to be both

extremely dangerous and less than human—and it was being fed to the public in enormous doses and on a regular basis. You cannot educate against that, and I'm not even sure that trying to do so is a good idea.

I became aware of the anti-gay campaign late: I hadn't watched state television in years and apparently didn't associate with anyone who did. I knew about local anti-gay legislation and didn't take it seriously. But in March 2012, St. Petersburg, the country's second-largest city, passed a ban on "homosexual propaganda," and it became clear that the parliament would soon take up the federal version of the bill.

"What are we going to do?" I asked my girlfriend. "Are we buying new cars, or are we selling everything and getting the hell out?" Darya had just given birth to our third child, and it turned out our two tiny cars couldn't accommodate a child seat or fit a stroller in the trunk, so I had started shopping for bigger cars. But this also meant that we now had three children—three minors living in the house—and we would be in violation of the "homosexual propaganda" bill every time we touched, kissed, or neglected to tell our children that our family was not equal to the neighbors'. I was uncharacteristically panicked. Darya, who was usually the voice of caution in the family, said, "Screw it. We're staying. This cannot be." I think sometimes lactation produces a false sense of security.

I went on TVRain, the largest independent television channel (whose reach, estimated most optimistically, is one-seventh that of the state-dominated channels), and recorded a call to arms. I showed pictures of my family and talked about the fact that the new law would effectively make it illegal for me to parent. I talked about the fact that the bill enshrined second-class citizenship into law. I asked all people of good will to put on pink triangles in protest against the looming fascism. I printed up 6,000 pink-triangle buttons and got rid of most of them very soon. In my insular Moscow world it felt like the tide might turn.

What I also did by recording that clip was make the fight personal. Gay rights efforts had always succeeded by putting a human face on the issue, and I was using that strategy. But it also meant that for the first time in many years of being an opposition journalist and activist in Russia I had marked not just myself but also my family as a target. And the fight became personal.

Vitaly Milonov, the St. Petersburg politician who was one of the main spokespeople for the "propaganda" bill, told the country's highest-circulation daily that Russian orphans needed to be saved from "perverted families like Masha Gessen's" (our oldest son is adopted). The Kremlin's Nashi youth movement accused me of being

on a personal campaign to destroy the Russian Orthodox family. Yelena Mizulina, the head of the parliament's committee on the family, vowed to create a mechanism for removing children from same-sex families. Dmitry "Enteo" Tsorionov, the leader of an anti-gay Orthodox activist movement, publicly volunteered to adopt my children. He also personally beat me up during a protest in front of the parliament the day the "propaganda" bill became federal law.

In June 2013, we admitted that we as a family had lost the war; we needed to get out of Russia. We set the deadline for the end of the 2013/2014 school year, and a month later, when it became clear to me that the bill on removing parental rights from LGBT parents would probably pass in the spring of 2014, we moved the deadline up to the end of December. We would be spending the fall dismantling twenty years of living in Russia. I would have to find a buyer for my yellow Mini Cooper with a red interior and less than ten thousand miles on the odometer, and set up a place to live, schools for our kids, and work in New York. So I definitely did not need another project.

But when Joseph finally chased me down on Skype, he, mercifully and surprisingly, said nothing about educating the Russian public. In fact, he hardly seemed misguided at all. And when he sent me Tatiana's story, I realized what he was suggesting: this would be a samizdat project, the telling of stories for a small audience that needed it. I remembered reading (and typing and binding) samizdat publications as a child and a teenager in the former Soviet Union, and I remember what they did for me: they affirmed my view of existence; they let me know that my parents and I were not the only ones who thought differently. Some of these books contained stories of a different reality; others exposed the reality in which I lived; but the most important ones gave voice to things I would have wanted to say myself. Nobody dreamed of using samizdat to educate the larger society; its mission was to facilitate communication among like-minded people, and to help them locate one another. When I was a teenager, samizdat kept me sane. I needed this now.

The process of putting this book together was messy, difficult, and seriously flawed. Aiming to publish the book before the Sochi Olympics, we needed to work very fast. It was extremely hard for the journalists who conducted some of the interviews to talk to people most affected by the new laws: people who have children, especially gay male couples with children, and people who don't live in Moscow or St. Petersburg and don't have good jobs.

I failed to convince any older LGBT people, those who lived through the experience of being gay in the USSR—and, often, unconventional family arrangements that defy Western-style characterization—to talk to us. At one point I feared all the lesbians in

the book would be lawyers and psychologists, and indeed a disproportionate number are indeed lawyers and psychologists living in Moscow. Still, the book has interviews with a young lesbian couple who fought off an attempt to have one of their children taken away by the courts; two gay male couples raising children with straight women; an unemployed gay activist struggling to stay afloat; interviews with people living not only in Moscow and St. Petersburg but also Sochi and Yekaterinburg and smaller towns that they chose not to name—and, of course, New York, Washington, DC, and Seattle.

Working with pieces in two languages meant I had to read every one of them several times, editing in the original language, then editing the translation, then making sure the two versions were consistent. Every day in November—as the largest gay club in Moscow faced an attack by masked gunmen, and then another by men who sprayed it with poisonous gas, as the LGBT film festival in St. Petersburg racked up a record five bomb threats, as I signed the papers selling our home, as our apartment turned into an ongoing yard sale and strangers carried away our belongings—every day, after the kids went to bed and the place quieted down, I read LGBT love stories. It was my own private samizdat, and it kept me sane.

JOSEPH

Early on, Masha and I decided to stick with a format that best captures the flavor of these stories: first person testimonial, letting people speak for themselves.

I've always been a huge fan of Studs Terkel and his stripped-down style of oral history, the kind of lightly edited interviews that play up people's voices, their tics, their unique turns of phrase; that make you feel like you're sitting across from these people in a coffee shop or in their living room. Masha organized interviews in Russia and I chased after Russians living abroad, a fast-growing category thanks to the deteriorating situation back home.

Almost all of the stories herein are carefully edited interviews with couples or individuals. A handful are original submissions that have been edited by Masha and me. A few others are updated versions of interviews originally published in *Afisha*, a Russian entertainment magazine, in February 2013.

In these pages you'll meet the owners of the only gay bar in the Olympic city of Sochi, two women reunited and raising children together after a decade apart, a journalist who lost his job after coming out and then married his partner weeks later, and dozens of other vignettes, many of them fabulously wry and unsentimental in a distinctly Russian way. We pulled this together in two months, with the help of a talented group of journalists, translators, an early assist from dear friend and LGBT rights champion Andrew Tobias, and the

team at OR Books, not to mention the help of my boyfriend Artyom, who was raised in the U.S. but born in Moscow. Still fluent in the language, he translated a number of in-person or Skype interviews with Russians still getting their bearings in English.

Given our brief window to pull it together, sometimes this book feels as much about the stories that got away: stories from the many men and women we approached who didn't want to risk exposure, for fear of backlash from family, colleagues, or the Russian government. Russian émigrés and LGBT exiles in major cities like London, Berlin, Barcelona, LA, and Tel Aviv with whom I was never able to connect. The Russian woman in Pittsburgh who canceled an interview at the last minute because a quarrel with her girlfriend didn't put her in much of a mood to wax poetic about their relationship. Love can be a bitch.

We made a mad dash to publish in time for the start of the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, which, given all the polemics, will now likely be remembered, ironically enough, as the gayest Olympics ever. But the Games will come and go and one thing will stay the same: millions of Russian men and women, like people everywhere, will keep on looking and fighting for love, ban or no ban. This lovingly prepared work of gay propaganda is dedicated to them.

MARINA* [1] & ELENA*
"And then they kidnapped my son for the first time."

When they come home from their office jobs to a small two-room apartment in a tiny town outside of Moscow, Marina and Elena change into almost-matching pajamas with cat-and-paw-print patterns. They are both 28, and they have been living together for less than a year.

Their story began in preschool, when Marina was in love with a boy named Kolya. They were so taken with each other that their parents ended up becoming good friends, staying in touch even after Marina and Kolya's romance faded.

Marina and Kolya grew up and both married different people when they were 20—no younger than most Russians. Marina had a son. Nine months later, Kolya's wife, Elena, was due to give birth to a daughter. Kolya suggested they go see Marina, whom he hadn't seen in years. His parents had told him that she had a new baby with her husband Vitya. They could go see what a real one looked like.

They went to visit, and the next day Elena had her baby.

MARINA

At first we didn't spend all that much time together. Then, as the kids got bigger, we'd take them to places in town. My husband, Vitya, didn't like to go anywhere. So, often, it would be just the three of us, Elena, Kolya, me, and the kids. Then we started talking to each other online.

ELENA

We were chatting on Skype, and just talking a lot. Marina has a complicated relationship with her parents and she was having a hard time with it. And things with Vitya weren't so good. So often she'd come over and cry and just need to talk about it. Do you remember why we started kissing?

MARINA

I think I was hysterical.

ELENA

That's right, she was hysterical. She'd had a fight with her mother and her mother had said a bunch of mean things to her, so Marina was saying, "I'm worthless, no one wants me." And I was like, "Don't worry, you are not worthless, somebody wants you." And I was also like, "Why don't you have an affair with some other guy?" And then we just started kissing.

I'd had relationships with girls before. It was never an issue for

me. But I was Marina's first woman. So the next day I decided we should have a talk. You know, because she had kissed a girl for the first time and it must be traumatic for her.

MARINA

So she came over all serious, to have this talk.

ELENA

And we talked, and Marina was like, "Let's give it a shot." And I was like, "Alright, but we are not going to sleep together right away. We'll take it slow." Marina had only ever been with Vitya before me. We slept together half an hour later.

MARINA

I had no issue with the fact that she was a woman. I'd been thinking of having an affair. And I was actually thinking it should be with a woman. Because…I don't know.

ELENA

You can't get pregnant.

MARINA

That's one consideration. I have a lot of friends who are lesbians —I met most of them through an online Anne Rice community, so it's never seemed like a big deal to me.

ELENA

And then—the thing is, we had no plans to live together, or to build some sort of relationship.

MARINA

But we told people. You told Kolya almost right away.

ELENA

By that time, Kolya already had Olya. Even before anything had happened with Marina, he had come to me and said, "Elena, I have fallen in love with a girl on Twitter." And I was like, "On Twitter?" And he said, "We started corresponding on Twitter and I fell in love." And I was like, "Kolya, I understand how you can fall in love. But on Twitter?" And he said, "You just don't understand." So I said, "Well, alright, you want to love somebody on Twitter, that's fine, go ahead." By that time we were really living together as friends, and I thought, if he's fallen in love, why should I stand in his way? So we decided we'd keep living together for a while, at least until our daughter started school, and then we'd see how it goes.

Plus, his girlfriend was living in a different city and it wasn't clear when she'd come here or if she'd come at all. And then I got involved with Marina and I thought, what a good thing that he's got someone else. For the May Day holidays, he finally went to meet her, and it was hilarious: Marina was ironing his shirts and we were sending him off to see his girlfriend.

MARINA

I took half the clothes out of his suitcase and had to explain to him that these were not the sorts of things he should wear on a date.

ELENA

Yes, she tells him, “This underwear is faded. You don’t want to be wearing this when she undresses you.” And Kolya was like, “Do you think we’ll be taking our clothes off?” And I was like, “I’m sure of it.”

MARINA

We got involved in March. In June, the two of us went to Bulgaria with the kids for a month.

ELENA

Kolya came for a week. He’d take the kids out for walks and then he’d come back and knock for a really long time to make sure he didn’t walk in on anything.

MARINA

After we came back from Bulgaria, I told Vitya. Elena and Kolya both tried to talk me out of it. They were saying, “Don’t do it, he’ll tell your mother!” But I told him, and he said, “I had a suspicion. All right, if you two are not planning on getting divorces, I guess this is all right. Have a good time.”

ELENA

Both our husbands had the same reaction: they suggested giving us sex toys as gifts. And I was like, “What do we need those for?” And they were like, “But how do you do it?” Kolya was always nagging me to tell him the details, because he thought it was very exciting that his wife had a girlfriend. But I told him we hadn’t had sex yet and were still in the hand-holding stage.

MARINA

Vitya would even walk me over to Elena’s house in the evenings.

ELENA

Vitya is very immature. And he quickly found that this is a very convenient set-up for him, because he didn’t have to take care of Marina emotionally anymore: it was my job now. He’d call me up and say, “Marina is not feeling well. Come over.”

MARINA

I started spending the night at Elena’s once in a while. My parents noticed and weren’t happy about it. They told my son that I shouldn’t be sleeping over at a friend’s house.

ELENA

We were trying to take it slow. I mean, we had children and all that and we didn’t plan to live together. Or maybe we did, but abstractly, in some distant future.

MARINA

But it was hard.

ELENA

It ended up that we were both living in two places at the same time.

MARINA

We would do the food shopping for one home, cook together, then go together to the other home and do the same thing. Same thing with the cleaning.

ELENA

And Vitya started pissing me off, just the fact that he was around Marina all the time. Anyway, it got complicated. And then, in March, their lease was up and the landlord wanted them out. And I said, "Why don't you move in with me? We'll see if we can make a go of it together. If it doesn't work out, so be it." And she decided to tell her parents.

I was saying, "Why do you need to do it?" And she kept saying, "I want to be honest."

MARINA

I thought my mother would take it worse, so I asked my father out to a café and told him, "I'm involved with Elena." And he was like, "I had a feeling. But you should make a sacrifice for your child. If you don't like men, you don't have to sleep with them, but you still should live with your husband for the sake of the child." Then the mayhem began. First my parents tried to send me to Cyprus to live for a year so I could get my head together. I said I wasn't going anywhere. Then they said they'd take my son away. They said all anyone had to say was that we were lesbians and we'd lose our children. And Vitya and Kolya should of course take the children away from us.

And then they kidnapped my son for the first time. He was spending the night at their house and they were supposed to take him to preschool in the morning. But they didn't, saying something about one of them not feeling well. I called in the evening to arrange a time to come pick him up, and my mother said, "We're going to the dacha and you are not getting him back." I rushed over, but by the time I got to their apartment, there was nobody home. I went to the police, and the police were like, "But they are his grandparents, what are you so upset about?" But I insisted and they called my parents. My mother immediately explained to them that I am a lesbian and they are saving the child. So the police were like, "Young woman, you know perfectly well why they took your son."

I told my parents that if my son wasn't home by Sunday, I would find a way to get the police after them. They did return him on Sunday, but they brought him to Vitya's house, not to us. And then Vitya brought him here. I didn't speak to my parents for a month after that. Then they called and suggested a reconciliation. I started visiting them once a week, with my son: we'd come over, sit there, and leave.

Then they demanded I see a psychologist. They found one who told me that Elena and I had been unlucky in men and that was the source of our problems. I left. I mean, I'd only gone in the hopes of fixing the relationship with my parents.

ELENA

Marina is always feeling bad for everybody. She felt bad for her parents—because, you know, they're her parents. And she felt bad for Vitya, because he is Vitya and none of this was his fault. And she was really hoping to fix the relationship and to be understood, at least a little bit.

MARINA

Also, my son loves them. And I thought I should try, because they are family. Then I found a counselor myself and we all started going together. That lasted a month or a month and a half.

ELENA

She would come home from these counseling sessions a total wreck. Because her family would say all these horrible things about how she's lost and I'm using her and how tragic this is and how she is killing her mother and I am using her.

MARINA

The sessions ended with the counselor saying, "Just leave your daughter alone. Your problem is not that she is a lesbian; your problem is that you've realized you can no longer control her and you are trying to regain control. You should not be doing this." I guess that's when my parents decided that this was war.

ELENA

That was also the point when we moved out of Kolya's apartment into a rental, which is smaller. And they were like, "The children are going to share a room! That shouldn't be allowed—they are a boy and a girl!" And we were like, "They are six!" And they were like, "But you sleep in the same bed!" And we were like, "So?"

MARINA

Yes, and the kids climb into bed with us.

The day before both children were supposed to start first grade, Vitya failed to bring Marina's son home from a visit. It turned out the boy was at Marina's parents' house, and this time they had no intention of giving him back. They had even already taken his file from the school he had been scheduled to attend, and enrolled him in a different one, near their house.

Four days later, Marina and two friends forcibly removed the boy from his grandparents' house; the police would not help them. Marina and Vitya both filed for divorce, and Vitya was now demanding custody. With Marina's parents in his corner, he came armed with psychologists who were willing to testify that the women's lesbian relationship would harm the child. Social services were also on Vitya's side: their position was that while

the women's living situation was physically suitable for the children, being raised by two women would harm the boy.

The day Vitya filed for divorce was the same day a member of the ruling United Russia party filed a bill in parliament mandating the removal of children from parents suspected of being gay or lesbian. Clearly, social services were eager to start enforcing this provision. But until the bill became law, social services couldn't take the kids; they could only help a father like Vitya fight for custody. And Marina's parents didn't have standing to file for custody, which is why they had been working on Vitya all summer, so Marina started negotiating with him. After a nerve-wracking five weeks, Vitya relented. They signed a separation agreement giving Marina physical custody, and the court dismissed the case.

ELENA

We weren't sure it was going to work out. I'm really difficult to get along with, and Marina is no angel either. When we moved in together, we were like, "Well, we'll give it a shot but we are not sure." Plus, the two children. I don't really like children. And then all this. Of course, they thought I'd bail, that this whole mess would begin and I'd leave her because it's not like I really need her.

MARINA

And then I'd have nowhere to go.

ELENA

My mother said that if this is a genuine relationship then all their efforts will just make it stronger. She said they'd be smarter to wait and see if we wouldn't just break up on our own. As it is, they did everything to bring us closer together.

Other than that, we're not romantic. Not at all. Not like Kolya and Olya, who celebrated the anniversary of their first kiss.

MARINA

And the anniversary of their first almost-kiss! It was very touching. You and I should at least figure out on what date we got involved.

ELENA

I found a notation in my calendar: "Must talk to Marina. This is fucked up." I think that would be our anniversary. So we're not romantic and we don't have much of a love story to tell. Though now, when I look back, I realize I was in love with Marina for a long time. I'd get jealous of Vitya. Whereas that one, she didn't care.

MARINA

I was looking at her and thinking, She would never be interested in me in that way.

ELENA

We'd see each other and as soon as we parted we would call each other and spend the rest of the day on the phone. And if we weren't

on the phone, we were chatting on Skype. Kolya said to me once, “I have this sense that you have someone else. I even have an idea of who it is.” And I was like, “Who?” And he said, “Marina.”

—As told to Masha Gessen

DENIS
“We’re bound by a cable”

An advertising executive and musician, Denis, 28, lived with Alexei, a DJ and performer, for three years. They broke up, and Alexei emigrated, but the two remain very close. They now meet up in Europe, Great Britain, and Moscow when they’re both on tour or if they end up at the same festivals.

I’ve been working at the Moscow offices of an international corporation for five years. I started as an assistant in the PR department and have risen in the ranks; now I’m the Creative Director. We work on Internet marketing and my job is to think up campaigns. Everyone at work knows I’m gay. I’ve been out since I was in school. I’ve never advertised it, but if anyone asked, I would always answer honestly.

I grew up in the Moscow suburb of Tushino, which is a little rough. Even so, the tough guys from the neighborhood never beat me up for my orientation. I don’t see why anyone would have any problems with me. I work, I work out like any other guy, and I know that I deserve respect like anyone else. If someone thinks “gay” is an insult, that’s their problem. As Coco Chanel said, “I don’t care what you think about me. I don’t think about you at all.” This was my motto before I even knew who Coco Chanel was. I’ll also say that I have often had conversations along the lines of, “You’ve changed what we think about gay people.”

I knew I was gay by the time I was 13. From the ages of 9 to 12, I was in love with a girl, but then I realized that I liked guys. I explained it to her right away. She got upset, but for a girl, it’s probably better finding this out than learning that you’re leaving her for another girl. We hung out after that, we even tried to have sex, but it never worked. After that, I was done with girls.

When I was 13, a boy in my class and I became attracted to each other. It wasn’t a serious relationship, just some friendly sex. It ended when we graduated. Several years later, we talked on the phone. He already had a wife and kids. I didn’t ask him about his orientation, but as we were wrapping up our conversation, he said, “Yes, it was cool back then!” No one in our school knew about us, especially since it was nothing serious.

My first real relationship happened when I was in college. I was about 20. It was very serious and important to me, and that was when I told everyone. Most important, my mother. The way she found out

was amazing. The guy was a radio DJ. One day, I left his house, got in a cab, and headed home. Meanwhile, he went to work and confessed his love to me on the air. On the radio he had a DJ name, and so he announced that a "man" had called in to the show, and here he used his real name, asking him to tell me, Denis, that he really loved me. I heard this while sitting in the taxi! When I got home, I was ecstatic that someone had confessed their love for me so the whole country could hear. My mother was home and she'd also heard it. Before that, all she had known was that we were friends.

It was a nightmare, of course. She cried for three days, worried about whether she would be able to look the neighbors in the eye. I told her that nothing had changed, that I still loved her, that I'm still the same person. The only thing that changed was that now she knew about me, which only made us closer. She came to terms with all of this, and on the fourth day, once she stopped crying, she started giving me advice about how to snag guys. She seriously told me what I should be doing with my boyfriend. Ever since, she and I have had a fabulous relationship, full of mutual love and respect. She understood that nothing had changed, that I have the same problems as anyone else. For her, the most important thing is that I be happy. I've never talked about it with my father. He works on ships, so he is a very severe person. On the other hand, he's very tactful and has never brought it up with me. My sister is the only one who is an awful homophobe; we've never gotten along. Perhaps it's sibling rivalry, but it could be something else. We don't talk much.

I guess I'm an exception, I was born lucky, but I've never had any problems with the people around me because of my sexual orientation. And I've never had even a shadow of a doubt that my orientation is OK. The fact that some people don't like homosexuals, call them fags, has never concerned me. I use this word too when I'm making fun of myself, but I've never felt like an outcast or abnormal. And no one has ever treated me like that. This is probably how it works: other people treat you the way you treat yourself. There are beaten-down people who consider themselves wrong and unhealthy, and that's what comes to them. I am always sure that everything is OK.

A year after I came out to my mother, my DJ boyfriend and I broke up, but soon afterward, Lesha appeared. He was my first serious, mature love. I introduced him to my mother right away. She really liked him, and saw that we were happy together. On top of that, he'd bring her flowers and dote on her. We were together for three years. We broke up because he left the country, but we're still very close. Like some people say after a break-up, two people are still tied together by "some thread," except Lesha and I are bound by a cable.

Everything that happens, happens here on Earth; but I'm convinced that the way I feel about him and the way he feels about me is somewhere in the stratosphere. Nothing can touch it. It's immovable. The way we love each other, it doesn't matter where we are, who we are with, and how.

—As told to Karen Shainyan

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OLGA & IRINA
"We'd gone about our lives idiotically."

OLGA + IRINA

Olga and Irina met and fell in love when they were 19. Three years later they broke up because, according to them, they didn't have the courage to stay together. Twenty-two years later, Olga works for an organization that provides emergency assistance to pregnant women in critical situations, and Irina is a painter and graphic artist. They now live together, with their children, and regret having lost so much time living apart.

IRINA

I was born in a small town in Siberia. I never went to art school, but I'd always wanted to be an artist, even though my parents told me, "You'll never be an artist." When I was 19, I decided that if I couldn't be an artist, I would study to become something else close to my heart. I chose literature. I went to Leningrad to apply to the philology faculty of the university. It turned out that I needed to take a history exam, so I tore off a flier for preparatory history classes.

One day—it was June 1991—I was walking down Ligovsky

Prospekt, going to the address from the flier, when suddenly, it happened.

Ahead of me, I saw a pink dress. It seemed insane: the pink against the grey backdrop of the Soviet Union. I only saw her silhouette, delicate and distinct. Everything was grey except the sun and this pink dress. I walked along and thought, "Where is she going?" I needed to do something, but I didn't know what, so I just followed her.

It turned out we were going to the same place, to the same class. We found ourselves in the foyer of an old St. Petersburg building with a grand staircase. I remember how, as she was going up the stairs, she turned around and looked at me. At that moment, I knew that I would never lose her.

Later, when I was coming home on the commuter train, I suddenly realized with horror that I hadn't gotten her phone number. Then, she didn't show up to several of the lessons.

OLGA

One day, I was walking down Ligovsky and I saw Irina coming toward me. I noticed her from afar and broke out in a smile, wondering if she'd notice me. When I saw that she wouldn't, I had to get in her way. She didn't see me until she was right in front of me.

IRINA

I was very happy to run into her. The first thing I said was, "Give me your phone number."

OLGA

Then we saw each other again at the class. When we came out, I thought that I needed to woo her somehow, so I said, "Let's go get some ice cream." I don't eat ice cream, but I thought that when you're wooing someone, you should always offer them ice cream. So we got some and went on a walk.

IRINA

She had such expressive eyes. They were enough to knock you off your feet. I was so in love with her. Olga seemed to be the kind of woman you had to marry, whom you could never hurt. I was very afraid that I would hurt her. I was scared to get close to her.

OLGA

Ira was the first woman I'd ever fallen in love with. At first, I didn't think it was love. I just felt like I had to be with this person all the time. The world changed when I was with Ira.

We hid our relationship from everyone except our closest friends. My parents suspected we were together, but tried to pretend that they didn't see anything. On the other hand, they put a lot of pressure on us to stop seeing each other. My parents would tell me that Ira was a bad person and that she would never teach me anything good.

IRINA

Everything was complicated. My parents had their suspicions. My mother hated Olga and told me so outright. However, it's probably not worth it to blame our parents for everything. We were the ones who couldn't deal with it.

OLGA

We couldn't live our lives. We were raised to believe that we owed things to everyone, most of all to our parents. We couldn't be ourselves. We needed to fit in with the rest of the world.

During her second year of university, Ira gave birth to Daniel. She was 21. We were together, but couldn't seem to figure out our relationship. Ira went away on holiday, and when she came back, she was pregnant. This was probably her trying to be "normal," like everyone else.

IRINA

If I hadn't been with Olga, most likely, I would have never had Daniel.

OLGA

I was adopted from an orphanage. I have a very special relationship to children. I'd always wanted them. I had to fight with Ira's parents, who wanted her to get an abortion. Ira gave birth and we lived together for another year.

IRINA

It was incredibly hard. She really wanted a child, but I didn't think that we could have one together. I was afraid that she would be unhappy and end up hating me. I left because I was afraid of the responsibility and had decided that she needed to understand herself and get her bearings.

Six months after I left St. Petersburg for Moscow, I found myself on the windowsill. At the last minute, I turned around and saw Daniel, who could barely stand on his own at that time. He was looking directly at me. At that moment, I changed my mind, and dragged myself back into my room.

OLGA

I was upset for a long time after Ira moved away to Moscow. But I really wanted children, and I didn't know any other way to have them other than getting married and giving birth. Today I see that there were a lot of other options and I could have done it some other way. About a year after Ira left, I got married to a guy from my class and had a daughter with him. Our marriage was pretty weird. We both led separate lives.

IRINA

I really missed the time we had spent together. When I was 32, I understood that I couldn't stop dreaming about her, it was

pathological. Her eyes, and the most beautiful hands in the world. My dreams told me that I was at a dead end, that I had done everything wrong, that I was ruining my own life.

One day I understood that I simply had to see her. This was about ten years ago. There was a big Rembrandt retrospective at the Hermitage so I decided to go to St. Petersburg. I called her early one morning and asked her to come outside. It was like the day we met all over again.

I remember that we were walking somewhere and then we realized we were lost. Something magic was in the air and I think we both understood that it was happening to us again. In the evening, she came to the train station to send me off to Moscow. While we were talking on the platform, I understood she also regretted the way things stood, that we weren't living together when we should have been. But she was a married woman and she didn't expect or ask anything of me.

OLGA

By the time Ira got in touch with me again, I was already well aware that my marriage was meaningless. When we saw each other, it became completely clear to me that I no longer wanted this weird life. But I didn't want to tell Ira that I was getting a divorce. I thought that I needed to get out of that relationship before starting a new one. After I finalized my divorce, I called her and told her. A few months later, we saw each other again.

IRINA

I was afraid that I'd stop drawing because she'd take over and I'd lose my mind. The opposite happened: I had an artistic breakthrough. It was as though all of the pieces of the puzzle had come together and now everything was finally in the right place.

We couldn't live together for a long time because our children went to school in different cities and we had to split our time. Every two or three weeks, we would travel between Moscow and St. Petersburg. Daniel graduated from high school in Moscow and enrolled in a university in St. Petersburg in 2010, and then we were finally able to start living together.

OLGA

Today, we live in St. Petersburg with my daughter, Christina. Daniel lives in the dorms but comes over all the time. Our children get along very well, they consider themselves brother and sister, and they constantly come to each other's defense if one of them is arguing with us.

IRINA

Children need to grow up in a loving environment. It's a shame that our children missed out on so much of it. We'd gone about our

lives idiotically. But we are very happy that we were able to find the strength and take the chance to try again.

OLGA

You're not always prepared for so much feeling. It's overwhelming. Everyone dreams of love. Everyone dreams of meeting their soul mate. But when it comes, it can be hard to deal with such a huge emotion.

IRINA

Everything that makes it clear that we need to leave this country already happened a long time ago. It's scary to walk down the street. The aggression is through the roof. On June 29, we went to an officially sanctioned gay pride event on the Field of Mars [a large park in the center of St. Petersburg] and ended up in a police transport van. We were pelted with rocks. One hit me in the stomach.

OLGA

Ira told me, "Don't look down at your feet. Look into the sky. That way, you can see where the rocks are going."

IRINA

What country are we living in and in what year, when priests bless half-drunk nationalists that pelt people with rocks while the police look on and then load us into police cars? People break bottles on us. We got cut and covered ourselves with our pride posters. When we got out of the police station and got on the subway, I had the clear sensation that we are aliens here.

OLGA

We need to protest and fight, but there is no sense that it will make anything better. At the same time, we know that we only have one life to live and we want to live it in peace, to walk down the street, be happy, and not be afraid that a rock is going to come flying at us.

—As told to Masha Charnay

OLEG DUSAEV & DMITRIY STEPANOV
"I think we've killed our mothers."

DMITRIY + OLEG

When we meet, Oleg pulls out a novel by journalist Artur Solomonov, which he says caused a fair share of controversy when published earlier this year in Russia. Its protagonist is an actor who falls in love with another actor. None of the major publishing houses would publish it. A small publisher finally picked it up, releasing the book with a disclaimer on the back cover: "This work does not contain homosexual propaganda and is not meant to offend people of faith." Despite—or perhaps thanks to—the controversy, Oleg says the book is selling well.

Oleg Dusaev, 33, and Dmitriy Stepanov, 30, met on an online dating site six years ago and have been together ever since. In the fall of 2013, they flew to New York to visit friends and to get away from a stressful month in Moscow, in which Oleg, an executive producer at a major TV news network, had lost his job contract after coming out on Facebook. While in New York they also took the opportunity to rent tuxedos and stop by New York City Hall to get married. The news spread quickly after they and their friends posted photos to Facebook, causing some commotion with their respective families back in Russia.

DMITRIY

My mother was crying on the phone. She said it was very strange; she was confused, disoriented, basically she didn't know how to react. She had a stroke two years ago, so I was really worried. Basically my Mom is still trying to understand our relationship. She's a very educated woman, but she has very traditional values.

OLEG

My mother was at home when she found out, but then the next day when she was at work they had to call an ambulance for her: apparently, she had a minor stroke. I feel like we've killed our mothers. We know it's their problem, but we're still worried. I understand that my mother loves me a lot, but she thinks of me as somebody with some kind of sickness, like Down syndrome. Obviously I wish she loved me differently. Dima's family is very tight knit: he has a sister, a father. But my mother and I, it's just us, she's all alone. I was scared she was going to die in her sleep. So they've given us a very nice wedding gift.

DMITRIY

My mother loves me the way I am, but she still thinks we should both get married to women, and have children. That people like us—smart, educated—should be raising children. She has this inner conflict, she knows it's impossible, but she still wants us to have wives. My father doesn't know yet, I'm scared of how he's going to react. It's all a little crazy right now.

OLEG

But my mother has always been difficult. She still won't talk to Dima. When he and I first got an apartment together, it was really hard for her. Mom and I lived together then, and when I moved out she acted like I was her husband leaving her, and leaving her for a man no less! It was very stressful; I basically became a wreck, I was having all kinds of panic attacks. Dima took care of me, and it worked out in some crazy way. I was having all of these problems, and Dima is a psychologist. Of course he didn't treat me himself, but he referred me to good therapists. Three of them.

DIMITRIY

I scared Oleg when I first told him that I really liked him. It was just a few weeks after we met, and I was pretty scared of what he would think. I thought he would freak out, that it could end everything. But somehow I knew I loved him already, so then a few weeks after that first conversation, we were at this members-only restaurant, one of these places where journalists and artists hang out, and this time I told him that I loved him. I could tell I scared him, but a little less this time. A few days later he told me he loved me too.

For five years Oleg and Dmitriy led a low-key semi-closeted life. They weren't bar flies, but friends would come over for dinner, and Dmitriy's

family would visit them at the apartment. Oleg's mother refused—she hasn't talked to Dmitriy to this day. Dmitriy built up his private practice as a therapist, and Oleg was moving up the ladder at the news desk of his influential TV network, Kultura. In August 2013 things changed.

OLEG

For five years I was volunteering at a big children's hospital in Moscow. It's for kids with some of the worst diseases, the hardest to treat, very tough cases, and kids come from all over the country since all of the best services are in Moscow.

One day last summer a friend of mine, a journalist, pointed out to me that the website of the hospital said that they wouldn't accept blood donations from drug addicts, prostitutes, or homosexuals. That was the day when something inside of me broke. I really felt betrayed: this was my home, I'd volunteered here for five years. I knew how the blood was stored—for six months, meticulously tested. This was a big, sophisticated hospital in Moscow, and they had this rule that had nothing to do with science or medicine.

After that I got in touch with Anton Krasovsky [another Russian journalist, fired in the summer of 2013 for coming out on-air] just to talk. We weren't great friends at the time, but we knew each other. Anton put a photo of the two of us together on Instagram, and in thirty seconds, literally, I got a phone call from somebody at the network, a gay guy actually. He was basically delivering the message from on high, and he told me I was being seen with the wrong person. It was literally seconds.

I had a conversation with that same guy a little later in a café, and it felt like an old-timey KGB meeting. He told me that being seen with Anton, I was starting to be seen as an "undesirable." That's exactly how he put it. He wasn't shy—he said I could be fired. I was a TV producer; people know me. For the people in charge I was becoming a risk.

That conversation really pissed me off. And that's what made me finally go on Facebook and post about it. The news spread quickly, and it got picked up by some other news sites. At work people stopped talking to me. But also people from the provinces started to write me, telling me I'm a hero, making it easier for others out there in smaller cities. It was very surreal. It still is. I don't feel I've done anything special. I just feel like I've been hit over the head by anybody who could get a swing in.

I don't regret any of it. I'd already started to lose it a little bit by that point anyway. I remember in May the Cannes Film Festival had just finished. One of our producers said, "No way, we can't talk about Cannes, that lesbian film won the competition," and I was just thinking how I was trapped in this theater of the absurd. I told her

she'd lost her mind! This is the Cannes Film Festival, it doesn't matter which film won, this is news. But this is how this law works: people learn to censor themselves. My contract was discontinued soon after.

DMITRIY

I'm not a public figure so I haven't been in the eye of the storm as much, but I was worried. Beyond psychological risks, we could be threatened. A lot of our risks all of a sudden increased. But whatever happens, I have my private practice: we can support ourselves and get by on that. A lot of my colleagues are also gay. I guess I have a slightly different view on it too. I kind of came out in stages, piecemeal. I think it's important not to live two personalities, to live just one life. I just did it in a different way.

OLEG

After I lost my job, we decided to leave for a bit, get a change of scenery. We already had visas to the U.S. since we'd been planning on visiting a friend who lives in Kansas City, and she had a kid last year. So we thought, while tickets are cheap, let's go to New York. We'll get married, then visit other people in the States. I had already proposed to Dima four years ago, and at least then he said yes "in principle."

DMITRIY

Oleg has always wanted to get married, and I was always pretty skeptical. Why get married? We have a great relationship. I started changing my way of thinking about it recently, though. I was in the hospital this summer for a bit, and I thought, what if they don't let him visit me?

OLEG

He was so annoying about it! We love each other, we understand each other. Why not?

DMITRIY

I'm still processing it all. Our relationship is evolving. We've been together for six years. When we were there getting married, I felt like we were reaching a point that should have already happened. It was like something fulfilling itself.

OLEG

Right now I have to say I'm not proud of myself for coming out, or getting married. I'm more proud of taking my first long flight. I'm terrified of flying, I've never flown more than a few hours. What I'm proud of is flying nine hours over the Atlantic to New York City.

—As told to Joseph Huff-Hannon

ANDREI TANICHEV & ROMAN KOCHAGOV

"Our parents and even the Sochi city government know who we are and how we live."

Andrei Tanichev, 35, and Roman Kochagov, 42, have been together for the past thirteen years. For the last eight, they've run the only gay club in the Olympic city of Sochi. They are reticent about their private lives, but eager to talk about business. But their private and business lives are intertwined and appear to be proceeding equally well. It's hard to believe their story is set in a country whose increasingly high-profile homophobia makes regular headlines all over the world. Despite their idyllic situation, Andrei and Roman are considering emigration and have already made one failed attempt to move to Spain.

ANDREI

We're both from Moscow. I was a manager at Central Station [the largest gay club in Moscow] and Roma came there as a patron. We met in the way that club managers usually meet with guests: we struck up a conversation. It was, incidentally, my last day of working at CS. We moved in together literally the day after we met.

ROMAN

It was spring, I was working at Sheremetyevo Airport as the head of passenger operations at the time, and even though I had my own place, we immediately rented an apartment for two. In autumn, we went on vacation to Sochi and we liked it here so much—the climate, the nature, the people—that we decided to stay here and open a gay hotel. It was the first of its kind in Sochi. For six months, we'd come once a week scoping out locations, doing construction, and by next spring, we opened our hotel, Okhota ["the hunt"] near the gay beach. It had six rooms. We had almost no overhead, no staff, just the two of us.

ANDREI

Yes, the name was a double entendre. It's actually in the woods not far from town, and there really are a lot of hunters there. Of course, it also has to do with meeting people. The business was so successful, a competitor soon opened up next door, Oblaka ["the clouds"]. It was bigger and more luxurious. The owner invested one million euros, I think. Even in Europe, we'd never seen such an extravagant gay hotel. It's 2.5 thousand square meters and only has

fifteen rooms.

ROMAN

We'd built our hotel up from nothing, and we never had any problems with the police or the administration. Only the journalists raised a stink. They wrote that the local residents were protesting. Meanwhile, our closest neighbors were two kilometers away, and no one has ever protested us. Later, in 2005, we opened a gay club. It was impossible to run both businesses at the same time, so we closed down the hotel and turned it into a large house. It's where we live and where our friends and relatives come to stay with us on vacation.

ANDREI

Launching the business was easy because there was a huge demand for this kind of hotel. There was only one gay business in the whole town when we opened. Imagine a summery café or ice cream parlor, without windows or doors, where during the day, grandmas drink lemonade with their grandchildren, and at night, the gay community comes out for drag shows. We saw that it was nothing like Moscow here. There was no danger, homophobia, or aggression. The transvestites are the most popular performers in town, and you'll see them at various parties and weddings.

ROMAN

The people here are exponentially more tolerant.

ANDREI

It's a tourist town. Everyone here is used to being polite and welcoming. Even in Soviet times, there were a lot of private businesses dependent on tourists. Plus, the city is very international, there were never any fascists or nationalists here because there are too many different ethnic groups.

ROMAN

Right now, we don't have a sign. It's not because we're afraid, though, it's just to keep certain people out.

ANDREI

When we had a sign, all sorts of people showed up, like tourists from the countryside with their children and grandchildren, and they didn't understand that this is a gay establishment. They don't even know what gay people are. Before these laws were passed, many people didn't even know the word "gay."

ROMAN

For the first four years, we had a glass door. No problems. When we were remodeling, we decided to put in something more substantial. Not for safety reasons, but because there's a hotel next door and we need a more soundproof door.

ANDREI

We often have to deal with the authorities, but we've never had

any problems with them. Especially now, right before the Olympics, they've even paid special attention to us. They call and ask whether we've had the menu translated into English, whether we've been training our staff to speak foreign languages.

ROMAN

Right now there are a lot of foreigners here, especially journalists. We've given thirty interviews just in the past month. One American journalist told us that she was convinced that our club was a myth, that there was just a residence at this address, and that the story that we existed had been invented by the ruling party, to make the Olympics run more smoothly. She was shocked when she saw how many people showed up for the drag show.

ANDREI

Another time, some journalists came here from the Associated Press who really wanted to write a story about the Muslim guests that come to the gay club. We used to have these theme nights, but right now we're Ukrainian-themed, so we had no Muslim flavor to offer. Anyway, the night they were there, during the drag show the emcee asked whether it was anybody's birthday. A young Chechen guy comes out and says, "I don't want any particular congratulations, but can I dance the lezginka [a traditional dance]?" And he started dancing and then his friends came out and his boyfriend, who had given him a hundred roses, and some girls. All of them were dancing.

We have between one and three hundred customers a night, although there are only fifty seats. We tried having a dance floor with electronic music, but no one liked it. There's only one road that goes into Sochi, a winding mountain road, and it's easy to control.

ROMAN

That's why there are no drugs here. At all. And so people don't go for club music.

ANDREI

That's even better for us, because it means we sell more alcohol. A lot of people want to open clubs that play house music in Sochi, but all of them fail. Last year, they opened "Pacha" and only ten people would come there a night so they had to close it.

ROMAN

People around here like good food and drinks. That's why we have a cabaret and put everything into our floor show. We often host acts like Lolita, Eva Polna, the red-headed Ivanushka, Chili, Mirage, A-Studio. You couldn't name them all.

ANDREI

The business is very profitable. We have some of the highest sales figures for alcohol in town. We're also the only club open seven days a week. It's unlikely we could have a business like this in Spain. There

are so many clubs there already and the culture is different. People go into a bar, have a cocktail, and move on.

ROMAN

It's completely different here. People want the table set, to have a big menu, salads, meat, they want to stay a while and have a good time. We have three chefs in our kitchen on weekdays. People don't order one drink at a time, they want bottles, and they want them to be as big as possible. Even high-end cognacs like Cordon Blue and X.O. People order by the bottle. And then they dilute it with cola.

ANDREI

We don't only have gay customers. There are a lot of women and maybe one fifth of our customers are heterosexual men who just come to hang out. There is a zone in the club for men only. It used to be very large, with a lounge and a separate bar and a back room. It turned out that this was unnecessary: the young people here aren't accustomed to these kinds of amusements. We left the small dark room, but replaced the lounge with karaoke for everyone, with hookah. It's incredibly popular.

We're completely open about our lifestyle. Not only our parents, but also the municipal administration is fully aware of who we are. My mother lives with us and helps us out a lot. I told her I was gay when I was eighteen. My brother knows as well. He works at our club.

ROMAN

I told mine when I was thirty. When I was eighteen, there was still a statute against "sodomy." My mother died a long time ago, but when Andrei and I moved in together I told my father. His response was: "Whatever grew, grew. You're my son." My father and his wife and children come see us often on vacation.

ANDREI

All of our neighbors know and understand. We've always been very lucky with our surroundings. Nonetheless, we applied for residency in Spain last year. This is the usual problem for the Russian businessman: you can make good money here, but it's hard to plan for the future. We're renting this building but investing in it is dangerous: what if the owner changes his mind tomorrow? We want to buy something, build something of our own, something more substantial, but we have no security, there's no assurance that everything isn't going to change tomorrow. On top of that, there's a lot of red tape. Right now, a lot of restaurants and stores are just closing for the Olympics.

ROMAN

The President signed a decree that transport vehicles can only enter the city with special passes, with permission from the FSB, the Ministry of the Interior, and the administration. Which is to say that

getting food and alcohol here is turning into a big fiasco. Sochi doesn't produce anything locally. Filing all the documents for the permits is such a pain in the neck that a lot of businesses have decided to simply shut down for that period.

ANDREI

We want to get married in Spain. And we want to have kids, but apparently, not here, if Mizulina passes that law right now [the law that would deprive same-sex couples of parental rights]. We've already applied for residency permits in Spain, but recently they changed the rules there. It used to only be necessary to own property worth over two hundred thousand euros, but now they raised it to four hundred thousand, which isn't something we have yet. So it didn't work out and now we're not sure that it will. We want to get residency in Europe, but for now, we like living here.

ROMAN

Many American journalists say that we could easily apply for political asylum in America. But we don't want to do that at this point.

ANDREI

We look to European clubs for inspiration, not local ones. I go abroad very often, and I'd like to go more often. On average, I spend five months out of the year in Europe.

ROMAN

I go less often than Andrei. I also like Asia. We never vacation together because it's impossible for us to go at the same time and leave our business. If we didn't work together, it's possible that we wouldn't still be together. This way, we always have something to talk about, a lot of common concerns. We're never bored around each other.

ANDREI

We hardly ever fight. We used to. When we first started, building the business, we would get into arguments. Now, if we fight, it's only in jest.

—As told to Karen Shainyan

MASHA & RUSLAN
"And suddenly, bam: I want a beard."

Ruslan, 29, is a journalist, and Masha, also 29, is a flight attendant. The two met over ten years ago, when Ruslan was 17 and Masha, 18.

RUSLAN

When I was fifteen, I firmly told my mother that I was going to get a sex change. For her, this was a disaster. However, it hadn't come as a surprise. She had always been afraid I'd do that. She always said there were people like this and that I was like them, and that she didn't want it to happen to me because it was scary and dangerous. On TV, they say that because of the hormones, you'll only live for ten years and you'll die young and sick. This is, of course, very far from the truth. As soon as I got permission, I got the surgery. I was 24. It's been five years. My life has changed dramatically. I can't imagine myself as anybody else anymore. I can't imagine what would have happened to me if I hadn't done this. How I would live, how unhappy I would actually be, which is unhappy as hell.

MASHA

Yes, and you wouldn't have married me. What would you be doing?

RUSLAN

Suffering. Crying.

MASHA

You'd probably be an activist fighting for same-sex marriage.

RUSLAN

Of course. I never felt like a lesbian. Since I was a child, I felt like a boy. Although I couldn't go right out and say that I was a boy because I knew I wasn't. I would look in my underwear and see that I was not a boy at all down there. This was my secret. I didn't know that there were people who changed this, but when I found out, I immediately felt like I was one of them. I met a group of them in Ufa. Before that, I lived in a very small town. This was before the Internet. I didn't have anyone to talk to about it. I probably thought I was a lesbian at some point, you could say that. But I didn't like to think of myself as a lesbian. I knew that they were not like me. They didn't want to get a sex change or have a beard. I had always dreamed of it.

MASHA

I remember how I found out the first time; it was a shock. I was going on vacation back home to the country and Ruslan gave me a letter to take with me, and said I should read it when I got home. I opened the letter and it had a picture of him with a beard—he'd

drawn the beard on. He wrote, “This is how I’m going to look.” Just like he looks now. I looked and I had tears in my eyes. I thought, “Dear Lord, what is this? What’s happening?” I couldn’t understand what it was about. At that point, we had been together for more than a year. It was so stressful, I still remember it. I cried, I was depressed, I didn’t know what to do. I thought it would ruin my life. Of course, it was because of a deficit of information. Especially since we were kids, we were both nineteen. I had never thought of myself as a lesbian. Subconsciously I felt that the person I’d fallen in love with was not a woman. I didn’t fall in love with women.

RUSLAN

With us, it wasn’t like, “Let’s define who you are.” We were just in a relationship.

MASHA

We were in love. I cried because I was afraid of the process. What would happen, what will people think, what will Mama think, what will it be like for him? I had been so happy ever since we’d started dating. Everything was going smoothly, we were living our lives, and suddenly, bam: “I want a beard.”

RUSLAN

It’s very important to have a good, beautiful, successful role model. I know that if they put some guy from the country next to me, I could serve as that good example. He’d look at me and say, “I want to be like that guy. He’s successful, he has a job, an apartment, a car, and a wife. He has everything!” I didn’t have a role model. I was surrounded by strange people who would go on and off their hormones, who were totally dysfunctional. They popped hormones because they felt like they were male, but then they would change their minds, and end up with a whole lot of health problems. Once I got the Internet, “The FTM Transition,” the most popular Russian forum on the subject, became a part of my life. There were such beautiful men on it. They were very different from their before photos.

MASHA

I am actually very grateful to Ruslan. He had to become part of this world and I fell in love with him so I also became part of this world. I met a lot of people and it made me very tolerant. I grew up in the country. My grandfather is a Stalinist, my grandmother is Russian Orthodox: it’s this explosive mix. I thought that I was the only one, that I was the only person this had ever happened to. He still used the female pronoun back then. I got used to the change very late, after everyone was already referring to him as a male. I was still writing him things in the feminine gender, and he’d be like, “I’ve asked you, blah blah blah,” and I’d be like, “Oh, oh, sorry.” Now it’s hard for me even to remember how it all happened; it is as though it’s always been

this way.

I couldn't get used to his name for a long time. I thought that it was a dumb name. There are so many names he could have chosen. Why this one? I called him by his nickname for a long time. Then I got used to it. Now it's completely natural.

RUSLAN

Trans people are often the least politically active; their activity ends with changing their documents and socializing in their new gender. There's this category of people, that when there's a conversation about transexuals and they don't know that you're transexual, they start saying these harsh things: "Those trans people are crazy, psychos, they've changed their gender." I hear this a lot. I am not too upset by it because I know that these people have never encountered it. If I told them I was trans, that I've changed genders, they wouldn't be able to assimilate the image of me and the image they have in their heads. But there's another reaction too: when someone finds out you're trans, they start treating you worse.

MASHA

Some people think trans people are zombies, monsters.

RUSLAN

That they're freaks with a bunch of things sewn onto them, that they're sick, crazy. When they see that you're that transgendered person, I don't ask them what they feel, but I feel like they can't reconcile me to the image they have. It causes cognitive dissonance. They see some guy on TV in a wig and that has nothing to do with the attractive young man they know.

My grandmother and grandfather's reaction was amazing. It was a weight off their shoulders. They had always thought I was crazy because I flew around like Tarzan, swung on the vines in the village and rode around on a motorcycle with my brother. They had always thought I was insane, and this calmed them. They even started being nicer to me.

MASHA

If that were my grandmother and grandfather, my grandfather would have resurrected Stalin and killed you and everyone around you. My mother knew since I was a college student. When we started dating she knew about it and she was fine with it. She got used to it.

RUSLAN

She's just really great. She loves me. Now she's my mother-in-law. They don't know at work. That chapter is closed. It's easier that way. Telling children is actually a complicated question. We've discussed whether we'd tell our children, whether it's worth it or not. We're leaning toward telling them. That is, to educate our children to be tolerant and LGBT friendly from the outset. That seems like the right

thing to do.

MASHA

Yes, unequivocally so. I would raise them that way no matter what.

RUSLAN

There are a lot of transgender people raising children and the children don't know anything.

MASHA

I think that it's important to tell children not in early childhood, but when the child is rational, when there's a foundation. Then the child is ready to learn the truth about their father. We're going to have children and they're going to be happy.

Masha and Ruslan have known each other for ten years, but they haven't been together that whole time. When Ruslan was twenty and Masha was twenty-one, they broke up for six years, but they remained friends. Several years ago, Ruslan and his mother moved to Moscow. Two-and-a-half years ago, Masha moved in with them.

MASHA

When we first broke up, we didn't see each other for a long time. Maybe for three years. Then we'd see each other once a year, twice a year, but steadily. We always had things to talk about. It's possible that if we had stayed together back then, we wouldn't still be together now. It's possible that we would have outlived our relationship by now. We needed to have more experience, to accept things about ourselves, and each other.

RUSLAN

Back then we were always fighting. It was very volatile.

MASHA

For a long time, we couldn't bear to break up. We'd do it, but then we'd get back together and this went on for a long time, almost a year. I am still upset about all of it, about all of those break-ups. It was very hard for me; I was horribly depressed. For three years. I didn't think we'd ever get back together. I got used to it. But everything happened of its own volition. I hope that we die when we're old, on the same day.

RUSLAN

We didn't have a real wedding. We had dinner with our relatives, drank champagne at a restaurant.

MASHA

I had this punk dress. It had a yellow tutu and a corset. I just really wanted a yellow tutu. It all began with that tutu. We hadn't wanted a wedding but then I said, "I want that tutu." Then, once you have a tutu, you have to invite people over. Everyone got drunk. Ruslan doesn't drink and I was sick. I get a fever in the middle of the

wedding and can't eat anything. Everyone got drunk and had fun, while Ruslan and I were sober. But we were happy, of course, and satisfied. It was really fun. And my dress was cool. Oh man, I really wanted that yellow tutu. I've always hated marriages. I had been trying to prove to everyone that I didn't need to get married, that I was happy anyway, that all of it was bureaucratic nonsense. When Ruslan wrote me a message saying, "Masha, do you want to be my wife?" I naturally said hell no, why would I do that, but really, I couldn't refuse. I didn't have a choice.

—As told to Olga Kurachyova

VOLODYA & DIMA
"We haven't stopped holding hands when we walk down the street."

VOLODYA + DIMA

Volodya and Dima met a year ago at a support group organized by the Rainbow Association in Moscow. According to Dima, one of the main topics of discussion was coming out. When they met, Volodya, 19 at the time, was a mechanic, a member of the Communist Party, and a student in his second year at the Moscow State Technical University. He worked with unions in the Confederation of Labor of Russia. Dima, 25, came to Moscow from Blagovechshensk to support the Moscow LGBT movement after the attack on a gay club on International Coming Out Day.

DIMA

I had just moved to Moscow and was looking for a place to live and work. I am an automation engineer: I design automated control systems for use in manufacturing or in offices. I didn't say that I was looking for work at the support group. I didn't want people to think that I'd come to get help with that. I wanted to do it myself.

Volodya and I hit it off right away. He gave me his phone number and invited me to a seminar for unions. I lost his number, but I came to the event. Volodya came up to me and asked, "Should we get out of

here?" I liked that he wanted to separate me from the group, as though we were running away together. We went on a walk. I remember sitting on his lap in the park. Some people walked by and said something to us, but Volodya told me, "Don't pay attention to them."

VOLODYA

I noticed Dima right away. I gave him my number and invited him to a seminar that was supposed to happen in two weeks. I came to the event with one goal: to find him. We ran away and went for a walk. First, we wandered around the Garden Ring, then down Tverskaya. We ended up in Petrovsky Park, where Dima kissed me. It was my first real kiss. That was that.

I understood that I needed him. I looked for him everywhere. He'd appear to me. I thought that if I waited too long to see him, he'd definitely disappear. Because of that, I convinced him to move in with me pretty fast. We've only gone for more than a day without seeing each other twice all year. We're very lucky we met. Of course, I get some of the credit; I know how to get what I want.

DIMA

I never thought things could happen this quickly. At first, I wasn't as serious about our relationship as Volodya. Now, of course, it's different. I miss him when he has to spend the night somewhere else. I like how Volodya takes care of me. I love to watch how he works. I like the way it feels when he presses against me at night. I love his long hair. He used to wear glasses like Harry Potter.

The first time Volodya's parents saw me, it was on Skype. They were giving him a hard time for not having a haircut and having gained weight. Suddenly, I appeared, wearing the yellow bathrobe Volodya's grandmother had given him. They started laughing and said that we were two of a kind.

VOLODYA

Dima is very shy. In the beginning, he didn't want to show his feelings in public. His shyness is appealing: it makes me want to dote on him.

We sometimes encounter various kinds of homophobia, but it's not like we're tormented by it. "Milonov's law" [on "gay propaganda"] hasn't affected us much. We haven't stopped holding hands when we walk down the street. Every last person in the neighborhood knows us.

Some gay couples would find our life strange. We would rather spend the night cuddling, watching TV, or talking about things than go dancing at the gay club. Of course we would like children, but not yet. I'm only twenty. Maybe in ten years.

—As told to Masha Charnay

KSENIA MESHCHERYAKOVA
"She's our child, deal with it."

KSENIA + LISA

Ksenia Meshcheryakova, 39, has lived in the U.S. for over ten years, but she only recently received her green card, after the Defense of Marriage Act was overturned by the Supreme Court. Her wife, Lisa, a U.S. citizen, was able to sponsor her. Ksenia works part-time as a therapist in New York and watches their one-and-a-half-year-old daughter, Sophie, during the day, while Lisa works as an immigration attorney. Though she was already living in the U.S., Ksenia helped launch the gay and lesbian "Side by Side Film Festival" in St. Petersburg in 2008. In 2013, the St. Petersburg organization behind the festival was able to beat back an attack from the prosecutor's office, which accused it of violating a new federal law on "foreign agents." Some cities have refused to continue hosting the festival, but in late November it pulled off its sixth year of screening dozens of LGBT-themed films in the heart of St. Petersburg, despite numerous bomb threats.

I met Lisa in St. Petersburg, in 1999. I was 24, she was two years older. She was there working on her PhD, studying the history of the Caucuses. She's Armenian, from Iran, but she grew up in the United

States. Her family moved there after the '79 revolution. I met her the first week that she was in town, at one of these artist-friend birthday parties, at a very old-style artist loft.

It was a strange moment when we met because a friend of mine, an American guy, had told me she was a lesbian. Back then I wasn't ready to have that conversation yet. I wasn't even really out myself then and didn't know any lesbians, so I kind of avoided contact. She probably left the party with the impression that I didn't want anything to do with her. But I left with the impression that something had happened. Normally I'm a really personable person, but that night I was scared to make contact. She was pretty, my age, an intellectual, and I wanted to figure out what was happening to me, why I felt like this. So I called her and we met up, and sat in a coffee shop on Nevsky Prospect until morning. It was funny, she spoke English and I spoke Russian. We could both understand each other, as active listeners, but neither of us was fluent in the other's language.

She was only there in St. Petersburg for two months, and during that time we were a couple for a month. We had a great time. Then she left for Armenia for her work, and I traveled around Russia during that time as well, that following year. Then she flew back to the U.S., and we went a year and a half without seeing each other, and all of a sudden St. Petersburg seemed less interesting. We kept in touch and talked on the phone, but it was very expensive back then. We didn't have phone cards and it was pretty clumsy sometimes. Over the phone it was hard for her to understand my Russian and vice versa. Then she came to visit for New Year's, in 2001. And it seemed strange to think: this is the person.

After that I had this idea, and Lisa inspired me to go with it, to study abroad. So I applied for a scholarship to continue studying psychology, and I was accepted on a full scholarship, to study art therapy at NYU. I moved to New York, and Lisa was in DC, finishing her PhD, but then she came up to New York and we moved in together, into a little apartment in the West Village.

Back then it wasn't so fancy, there were fewer boutiques. We were right by Marie's Crisis, the piano bar, and Kim's Video, which is closed now. Before I came to the U.S., I had seen maybe five lesbian movies, so when we lived there I pretty much watched all the gay movies I could from Kim's Video. They were $1.50 if returned before midnight. My Kim's Video experience really played a role in the Side by Side Festival. I built up a whole documentary program. When we launched in 2008, that was the year we brought John Cameron Mitchell. He presented *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*. The police tried to shut it down, but it went on anyway, underground. I wasn't there that year, but I went back in 2009. I hadn't traveled back to Russia in five

years. I was really worried I wouldn't be let back into the U.S. to be with Lisa.

Our families took a lot of time to understand us, a lot of time and a lot of work. But they've come a long way. A lot has happened in the last year. Once I found out that Lisa was pregnant, that this was for real, there was no more hiding anymore. Things changed when we had Sophie, in June 2012. It was just a feeling of: we are who we are. She's our child, deal with it.

Lisa's mother came to stay with us after the birth, and my mother came around her first birthday. My mother treats Sophie like a grandchild. It doesn't come naturally to her, but she felt it was important to tell her family, to tell her cousins about my family and I. It's also important to my mother that Sophie speak Russian, since my mother doesn't speak English. So we Skype a few mornings a week. This is how we set it up with Sophie: I speak with her in Russian, Lisa speaks with her in Armenian, and then out in the world we speak with her in English.

We got married a month before Sophie was born. I'd been in the U.S. for many, many years already, on all kinds of visas, on student visas, on work visas. But I was on shaky ground. I couldn't change jobs easily. And at work, at some point, I also started to come out. Because of the DOMA decision, now it's legitimate. It's on paper. I got my green card. So it was a decision to come out publicly.

You know how sometimes you like the way something smells, but you don't know why? Or how there are certain works of art that you can't live without. That's how it is with Lisa. She's very intellectual, very curious, we constantly have this exchange. She's interested in where I come from, where my family comes from. And she's the one who brought me here, not just physically, but really brought me here. She's just deep. And it's just us here. We don't have babysitters, we don't have grandparents in New York to look after Sophie. She's my buddy, she stuck around even with my whole immigration saga.

And when she took the step and became pregnant, it grew us. We have a little person now, a child, to discover the world from that side. And we feel strong enough to feel that we're good, gay parents. Because I'm the best mom for my child—just ask her if she would trade me for anyone. But by law I still have to adopt Sophie. It's such a strange concept. I drove Lisa to the hospital, went with her to the delivery room. I helped deliver Sophie. And I was the second person to hold her.

I'm not a very optimistic Russian. It could be bad for a really long time. And Russia is a dramatic place: it goes through collapses. My generation of Russians knows what hunger is, what homelessness is. We lived through that time after the collapse of the USSR when it was

like a jungle. Russia is my homeland, my motherland. In Russia this is a big concept, you don't betray it, but I wouldn't take Sophie there now. If we went we'd have to be extremely careful. Why would I put my daughter in danger? I have a dream that I can bring my daughter back to my motherland, but my motherland is acting like an abusive bitch, and is hateful to people like me. I don't love my mother any less, but I won't let her have my child.

—As told to Joseph Huff-Hannon

SERGEI
"I've never slept with a woman, but family is another matter entirely."

Sergei, 40, has gone from working at an armaments factory to hustling in front of the Bolshoi Theater, from unrequited love at vocational school to a living arrangement with a wife and boyfriend, from checking himself into a psychiatric hospital for observation under false pretexts to a very real battle with HIV. Six months after this interview, Sergei moved to a village outside of Moscow where he lives like Konstantin Levin in Anna Karenina. *He's building a house with his own hands, baking cabbage pies using only the cabbage he grows, and raising chickens, geese, and ducks. He's not a great farmer: he gave his baby chickens away to a neighboring family with lots of children, and he couldn't bear to kill his geese because "they turned out to be very intellectual birds."*

This September, he started a new phase of his antiretroviral therapy and created a group on the popular Russian social network VKontakte called "I'm HIV+ and Gay, I have nothing to hide." He considers leaving Russia.

Sometimes I think I'd like to get out of here, and close my eyes and ears to everything that's going on here. Not even watch the news. Just quietly live my life. Right now, I prefer the country life. I'm sick of fighting for my place in the sun, especially since in Moscow, that could just be a free parking spot. A house in the woods one hundred and twenty kilometers from the city might sound grim, but there's a pond here with red and white carp. They're clever fish, never hungry. You can't catch them with your bare hands. I have to put out traps. The river feeds me, too, with pike and chubs. The house is my wife's. I call her Auntie. She's this classic Faina Ranevskaya [a beloved Soviet actress] type. She's retired, quick-witted, always has a cigarette in her mouth. She used to be a camera woman. Egor and I met her when we got an apartment in the center of town ten years ago. Egor and I have been together for seventeen years now. We met through a mutual friend. Egor courted me for a whole year, taking me out to dinners with fine wine and salmon.

We would go to clubs with his friends, who were always successful, young, and beautiful. We've been living together ever since.

Auntie had a husband, and we struck up a neighborly friendship with him. We'd go to the dacha together, go fishing. At first we told

them we were brothers, and then they weren't idiots and they figured it out. Her husband got cancer and a year after he died, she asked me whether I wanted to marry her. I said, "Alright." She wanted a man around the house. I've never slept with a woman, but family is another matter entirely. On Friday we have a doctor's appointment, and I'm taking her there. How could it be otherwise? She's my wife.

I know how to do practically everything. I'm a good cook, I can do plumbing, electrical work, I can fix cars. I installed a "smart house" system at my country house myself. If you want, right now, I can turn on the lights or the aerator for the fish tank via text message. My cat has a collar with a signal and there's a cat door that can read it. It's built so that she is the only cat who can get into the house. Meanwhile, Egor can't even drive or hammer in a nail. He's a respectable man, a scientist. Sometimes I get scared that if something happens to me, him and Auntie won't even be able to go to the dacha on their own. These fears are justified: for a year and a half now, I have known that I've got HIV. It makes you look at things differently.

So many things have happened to me. I started out as an engineer for communications devices. There was an armament factory on Borisovskie Prudy Street in Moscow where my job was assembling heterodyne receivers for satellites. I was earning my first salary when I was still in high school. I'd waste my money on clothes, fashionable sneakers. I've had every kind of job you can imagine. My employment record book ran out of room. At my last job, I got sixty thousand rubles [just under $2,000] a month. A good, honest salary. I was a physical plant manager, responsible for transparency in acquisitions, and fighting kickbacks at our company. There's even an article about me in a business magazine; the headline says, "The Plant Manager Who Doesn't Steal." When I was young and very poor, I would put up fliers: "Husband for an Hour." [a common Russian expression for a handyman]. I would go to people's apartments to fix things. That was during the day. At night I was a party boy, a cute little white bunny hopping around Moscow.

I grew up in Biryulevo [a Moscow suburb with a reputation as a rough neighborhood]. My grandmother was a real sea mistress [a reference to a Pushkin fable about a woman whose ambition was to be all-powerful]: she carried the whole family on her back. My mother was a little dormouse, a hard worker and smart cookie. My older sister and I hardly talk. I had to come out to my family when I was dodging military service, using my homosexuality as the reason. I would have gladly served, but I couldn't bear to think about what my family would do without me. I checked myself into the Bekhterev Psychiatric Clinic for two weeks for observation. I prepared: I'd borrowed my sister's "Ballet" brand foundation and put on some bike shorts.

Everyone in my ward was faking.

There wasn't a single gay man among them. There were grown men next to me, who'd come down with delirium tremens, schizophrenia. That's when I learned that madness is very contagious. On top of that, the doctors weren't quite right in the head themselves, not to mention the nurses. They were a mess, they'd swallow a bunch of pills and laugh all night, ha ha ha! After your third night in this environment, your mind starts to go a little bit.

Everything else was good there. They fed me well, I slept well. Work therapy helped with sleep. They put out tea pots with wheat paste and kraft paper. We had to make envelopes for syringes. They didn't have disposable syringes back then: they would disinfect glass ones. We also had to package bay leaves. After that, there were enough bay leaves in the house to last three years. I came back well rested, as though I'd gone to a resort.

At vocational school, I fell in love with the head of my laboratory. He was insanely beautiful, one in a million. I gave everything to working in that lab just to make him happy. I fixed it up, I soldered the metal for the hardware, I lay the parquet flooring, I put in the glass for the windows. He'd come and hug me and say: "Bunny, great work!" He had a wife—I liked her—plus a mistress, a model. He caught on to me, and sometimes he'd act like a total monster. He'd build me up until I was white hot. Once, I was staying at his place, and he came out of the shower naked. Another time he kissed me. He would set off these hysterical fits in me. He saw what he was doing to me and apparently he got off on it. But I'm good at forgetting bad things.

Every night after school, there was nothing I could do about it, I just couldn't help myself. I had to go downtown. I would get on the train, get off and wander around. I'd look for weeks, and then I'd find where the gay men hung out, with all of the inevitable consequences. I made money on that, but not very often.

There was one little guy from Krasnoyarsk who would always find me. It was amazing. He'd get a hotel room and in the morning, he'd tell me: "There's a briefcase over there, open it, take whatever you need." This thing was stuffed with bricks of cash tied together with twine. He had some kind of business here. The star of this group was this totally cruel guy. His nickname was Katka or something. Now he's in soap operas, he plays cops. I won't say who it is. I met the famous Shlep-noga ["slap-leg"], the grandmother of Soviet prostitution. She was an old lady, but she still hung out. Taxi drivers respected her; they'd just give her money for nothing. Tough guys would come by on a regular basis, but I was a good runner, a candidate for a master of sport in track and field. They start harassing us, they'd eat my dust.

Where would I run to? To the Mausoleum, of course. There are always cops there. I sit down on the curb and stay there protected by the guard of honor until morning.

We had our own criminals around, the mafia-controlled scalpers working the Bolshoi Theater. Those guys were scary. It wasn't like they were going to invite you to the premiere of *La Sylphide*. It was more like: "Today you're coming to my house." There was no point in putting up a fight or arguing. It was better to work things out with them peacefully.

Later, the cruising spot outgrew its usefulness because of the Internet. The first time I turned on a computer was in 1996. Egor bought an extremely expensive Texas Instruments laptop. I still keep it in my garage as an antique. When I was young, my avatar name was Tornado. Now I have another one, more appropriate for my age.

Are we in an open relationship? Well, you couldn't say that either of us can do anything we want. Egor is a pretty jealous guy, and I only recently learned to forgive. As recently as three years ago, I would lose my mind, install spyware on his computer, and look at all the screenshots. I knew he was cheating on me and it drove me crazy. Then I told myself: "No, your own hands are dirty, you have to forgive," and I deleted all the spyware. But situations come up. Like I'm going to the dacha and, just in case, I toss a dictaphone under the bed. Then, when I get back, it's like: "So you just had coffee with him?!"

Now, because of the disease, I take better care of him. I say things like, "I'm going out of town for a week, you should meet someone, just be careful." The situation is horrible. There's a terrible epidemic. The official numbers lie. You could catch it even if you protect yourself. That's my experience. I never had unprotected sex. When I was 14, I got syphilis and learned my lesson. I know a ton of people who also have HIV, even though their online profiles claim they're clean. These people spread the disease. It's scary. I'm not that young anymore. I no longer want to run around. I just want peace and quiet. I read. I recently read everything by Ulitskaya [a popular contemporary Russian author], both her plays and her novels. I like her prosody, plus, she's for democracy.

I had a good friend, a straight guy from Birulievo. Then I went and told him I had HIV and I haven't heard from him since. I said this to spite my enemies but it turned out it was to spite myself.

I did something very bad to someone once. We were friends, and lovers. He'd come visit me in the country. One day he called and said, "I'm positive." And I said, "I'm sorry to hear that." After that, I deleted him from my phone and never got in touch with him again. Six months later, I was diagnosed and decided to tell him. Why had I done

that? It was probably the fear of death as an unknown. People want to distance themselves from what they fear.

I came to terms with my diagnosis pretty quickly. You can live with it. It's not the '90s when people would literally burn up from this disease. The most important thing is constant monitoring. For ten to fifteen years it should be fine. Sometimes I regret not having gone to Europe when I had the chance. Especially since Russia has been nothing but upsetting recently. On the other hand, you can't beat fate. When I was 17, I thought that 22 was old age. Now I'm almost 40, but I still feel like a kid. My favorite saying is: "Don't rush to live." The older you get, the faster the days go by. When you're young, a day is as long as a year. Now, I desperately want to run for a little longer.

—As told to Ekaterina Dementieva

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OLGA & MARIA
“I saw her and thought, therapy was successful!”

OLGA + MARIA

Seven years ago, Olga, a psychotherapist, traveled to the Crimea for an intensive summer seminar in Gestalt therapy. Olga was 27, married, with a 4-year-old daughter. There were over one hundred participants in the seminar. The majority of them were clients who had come for psychotherapy. Among them was 28-year-old Maria, an artist working as a designer in Moscow. She’d been suffering from a case of unrequited love for a woman who wasn’t available. She came to the Crimea in order to turn over a new leaf.

OLGA

I came to the seminar, as Vladimir Ilych Lenin said, to “study, study, and study more.”

I arrived a day early and settled into my hotel room. We were two to a room. I was supposed to have a roommate. The next day, when I was coming back from the beach, I heard the other participants arriving from Moscow. They were very loud as they moved in, and from the next room, I heard this voice.

Because of my background in music—I graduated from the vocal

department of the Gnessin Academy of Music—the sound of a person's voice is important to me. I didn't see who was talking, I just heard their voice, and it didn't matter to me whether it was a man or a woman. Everything inside of me turned upside down. I really wanted to see who it was. It turned out that my room shared a balcony with the one next door.

MARIA

It became our meeting spot.

OLGA

That evening, my roommate and I bought some Crimean wine and decided to make friends with our neighbors on the balcony. That was the first time I saw Maria.

MARIA

My first impression of Olga was that she was cold. I was kind of wary around her. I didn't want to get close to her, especially when I found out that she was married and had a daughter. I'd come to the seminar in order to figure out why I was always choosing unavailable women. I knew that she was not at all what I needed.

OLGA

The next day, when the clients were assigned to their therapists, I found out that Maria was supposed to be my client. I was horrified. I went to the administrator and said that I couldn't be Maria's therapist because I was in love with her. She asked me when we had met. I said, "Yesterday." She then asked whether anything had happened between us. I said, "No, but it will." She tried to find another option, but she wasn't able to. So I had to go and fulfill my duties as a therapist.

MARIA

I really liked the way Olga worked. First and foremost, I saw what a strong therapist she is. She really helped me. When we met outside of therapy, she could come up to me and touch my hair, and I saw that she was interested in me. She would sing a song, and it would turn out to be my favorite song. She liked the grey hair on my temples. We were leading two lives: our life as client and therapist, and our relationship outside of therapy.

OLGA

Then the seminar was over. After we had fulfilled all our duties, she came to me.

MARIA

This time, I wasn't going to pass up what had come to me. I climbed over the barrier onto her part of the balcony, sat down in front of the open door, and started watching her change. I wasn't hiding my presence: it was more of a provocation.

OLGA

I saw her and thought: “The therapy was successful!” I responded to her call. That was the first night we spent together.

MARIA

We saw each other again when we got back to Moscow. Several days later, when Olga was at her father’s birthday party, she sent me a message that said that she’d told her parents that she was going to get a divorce.

OLGA

My husband and I had a bad relationship. For the previous two years, I’d been attempting to save the marriage for the sake of our daughter. If it weren’t for her, we would have broken up ages ago. We started splitting up our property and I moved my daughter into my parents’ house. I had to work a lot to buy out his share of the apartment. Maria really supported me. But it all took time, and for five years I had two homes: one with Maria and one with my daughter. I couldn’t move my daughter in with me and Maria for a long time because I wanted to be certain that I would be moving her into a stable situation.

MARIA

We couldn’t have moved her in earlier because we were both working a lot. I was saving to have my own child. I really wanted children and knew that I wanted to do everything I could to make it happen. We started trying to conceive a year after we met. Three years later, I was pregnant. Two-and-a-half years ago, I had a son. After he was born, Olga was finally certain that her daughter should be living with us.

OLGA

That was when she was transitioning from elementary to middle school. I decided that since she was going to be changing schools anyway, it was the most logical time for her to move. Since then, we’ve all lived together.

MARIA

When they started discussing the law about taking away the children of same-sex couples, I got scared. How would I defend myself and my children? We called a lawyer we knew and tried to figure out how much a law like that would affect us. We considered emigrating.

We worked so hard to be together and have a right to our lives. We tested our love with care and patience. Now someone is telling us that all of this is subject to penalties or other dangers.

My son won’t have a father. This upsets me as it is. But this is the way I am and it’s all I can give him. That is my choice; my cross to bear. I will definitely ask his forgiveness for not giving him a choice. But I don’t want anyone else blaming me for this.

OLGA

Because we're not allowed to get legally married, we have "unsanctioned" weddings. They're spontaneous. We had a wedding in Verona where we hung a little lock by Juliette's house. Everyone clapped for us and cried: "Hooray!" We also had weddings in Ryazan and Suzdal. In Moscow, we had a wedding with a limo and doves.

MARIA

Olga is the kind of woman you want to give the stars to. Our family is the most important thing in my life. It is always changing. Our plans change, the number of children we have gets bigger. But I know for sure that I adore Olga.

OLGA

I used to think that marriage and strong feelings didn't go together. Thanks to Maria, I am finally living the life I'd always dreamed of.

—As told to Masha Charnay

ALEKSANDR BERGAN & IVAN SAMSONOV

“The most difficult moment of the ceremony was giving a kiss.”

IVAN + ALEKSANDR

After six years together, Aleksandr Bergan, 27, and Ivan Samsonov, 32, were married at New York City Hall on October 10, 2013, just a few months after leaving Russia. A day after the wedding, Aleksandr posted photos of the ceremony on Facebook, which then got picked up by a local blogger in their hometown of Murmansk. The blog post itself was relatively supportive, but 95% of the comments were predictable: hateful and derogatory, some calling for their death.

Both Aleksandr and Ivan had what they described as good jobs back in Russia. Aleksandr was an agent at the Murmansk port, dealing with customs, and Ivan was a telecoms marketing manager. In February, Aleksandr was attacked in front of their apartment building by men who shouted homophobic slurs and slashed his forearm with a knife. A few weeks later, the windows of their car were smashed in. In July, they left their jobs, sold their apartment, packed a suitcase, and moved to the U.S. to start from scratch. “People think we came here for financial reasons,”

Aleksandr says. "But we had a good life in Murmansk. We're not in search of a good life; we want a safe life."

IVAN

Aleksandr was quite popular as a photographer in Murmansk, quite well known. He even had a museum show supported by the local government. That's when he had this great idea to come out: he thought if people liked him as a photographer, they'd like him as a gay guy. It obviously didn't work out that way.

ALEKSANDR

I came out on Twitter in February. I wrote: "I'm gay but let's not talk about it." A bunch of people retweeted it, some local newspapers wrote about it, and soon the insults started. The day I came out, the Murmansk government unfollowed me on Twitter. Things changed really quickly after that.

We moved to St. Petersburg first and stayed with some friends. But the things they told us made me think it's not any safer there than in Murmansk. I'm planning for the future. I don't want to live like a spy. I want to live an honest life. To many Russians, maybe it looks easy to live like a spy. But you have to lie to family, to friends.

Here I can be open. It's my dream. We can sit together, we can hug. I don't have to worry about other people. We moved from the Middle Ages to the modern era. I'm only now realizing how difficult it is back there.

IVAN

We met at a little party, at a friend's house. When I first met him, I thought he was quite arrogant. He backed me into a corner and said, "I like you and want to have something with you." I thought, "Why not." He was young, handsome, sporty. I liked him. And as these things go, after some drinks he came over and stayed the night. Then he stayed the second night. Then he stayed the third night. Then he came back with his suitcases.

I think the first year was hard sometimes. To get used to each other. But after the first year, things were great. We were thinking about getting married even while we were still in Murmansk, two or three years ago. We thought about traveling to Sweden or Norway to get married, and then coming home. It'd be just for us. It was difficult to hide our relationship. We had a very small flat, we told people we were students, roommates, except for a few close friends. When our parents would come to visit, one of us would go for a walk for a few hours, and we'd hide each other's things.

When I first told my parents, of course they weren't happy. I don't think anybody in this crazy Russian world is happy to find out their son is gay. But my parents are very wise people. My mom once told me that she's happy for me that I met Aleksandr, but she's sorry she

gave birth to me in a place where I can't be happy.

I would never do this alone. I would have just continued to live the lie that most every other Russian gay guy lives. You have your job, you have some friends, you have other friends who don't know about you. But when you have a partner it's easier to go somewhere where you don't know anybody.

ALEKSANDR

When we got married, I was crying. He was, too. I couldn't even say "yes" when she said, "Do you take Ivan…" but I finally answered yes. Afterward, we had a little party with our one friend, who was our witness, and ate sushi and drank champagne. The most difficult moment of the ceremony was giving a kiss. When you have to hide everything for so long, for years, it's not easy to show everything all of a sudden.

IVAN

The ceremony itself is a very big event in anybody's life. We didn't have relatives or friends there who could support us. I was happy, of course, but sad that my parents couldn't be there. After the ceremony, when we got our marriage certificate and went to take some photos, we heard some people saying things like: "How sweet, look at them." It was hard to believe. Later we sent some photos to our parents, and they sent us congratulations back. My sister had to look at our wedding pictures at night, after the kids went to sleep. After all, it's illegal in Russia: you can't show the kids.

We hope it will be easier in the future in Russia. Maybe when Putin leaves. Not all Russians are homophobic, but when you have it coming down from the top? Maybe things can change in Russia, but it will take like two hundred years.

ALEKSANDR

No, sooner. Maybe one hundred years.

—As told to Joseph Huff-Hannon

ELVINA YUVAKAEVA & ELENA NIKITINA
"This is my family, and you can't change families."

Elvina, 33, is a marketing manager at an engineering firm. She is also the co-president of Russia's LGBT Sports Federation. Elena, 38, studied to be an architect, but is now an interior designer. She is also a Candidate Master of Sport, a Russian ranking for non-professional athletes, in judo. In 1998, she put together a team of women who practiced judo and who could play basketball, and took them to Amsterdam to compete in the Gay Games. Elvina and Elena met a little before New Year's in 2008.

ELENA

Elvina was renting an apartment to a friend of mine and I had helped her move in. When I went into the apartment, I saw a photo of Elvina and fell in love.

ELVINA

I knew Lena from afar. Livejournal was very popular back then and there were a lot of people on it. I wasn't one of her friends on the site, but I would look at her page every now and then. The strange part is that we're both from St. Petersburg, but we'd never crossed paths. We had a good number of mutual friends in Moscow, too, but had never been introduced until we met that first time.

ELENA

Before New Year's, the three of us ended up having dinner together: Elvina, my friend, and I. You could say she set us up. It happened very fast, all at once and beyond all doubt. We never had a phase of buying candy and flowers; we immediately began working out how we were going to live together.

ELVINA

The first time we saw each other was two weeks before New Year's. And right after New Year's, we were practically living together. For me, this was love at second sight. I decided that I was Lena's once and for all, which is something very serious for me. This is my family, and you can't change families.

ELENA

I am more or less openly gay, with my family and at work. If no one asks, I won't say anything, but my boss knows and a few of my colleagues do, too. I didn't haven't any problems with my parents. Elvina is a part of the family. When she goes to St. Petersburg without me, she can stay with my parents.

ELVINA

Lena's mother even says, "Come on, it's time for the two of you to have kids." We're taking our dog to breed in Sweden next time she's in estrus, and her mother jokes that since we've already found a foreign husband for our dog, why can't we do it for ourselves?

ELENA

Since I'm the older one, I'd like to be the first to give birth. We don't have any set criteria for choosing the father, but we need to know the donor. I'd like to see his parents, determine whether there are any pathological problems, know what his family is like psychologically, and so on. I would not be against the father participating in raising the child. We would like to do it in Russia.

ELVINA

But ever since they started discussing the next phase of the anti-gay law, the possibility of children being taken away from same-sex parents, we've lost sight of what to do. We'll see what happens after the Sochi Olympics and decide. Of course, it's scary. We're not going to hide behind sham marriages. If we have kids and that law goes into action, we'll just have to be extra careful.

ELENA

I don't want to leave. I like living and working in Russia. I'm not 25; I can't start my career over from scratch.

ELVINA

I was in the U.S. recently. For the first two weeks I was there for a State Department program on sports marketing. There were six of us, and the other five people were representatives from the organizing committee of the 2014 Sochi Olympics. They all knew each other because they all worked in the same department. On the first night we got to Washington, they had a lot of questions for me: Who was I? What did I do? And so on. I told them, and they were more or less decent. Toward the end, when we were parting ways, they told me, "Elvina, you've opened our eyes. You've broadened how we see and understand the world. We had never thought about the social difficulties same-sex couples faced. Now we understand what you are fighting for." These five people were a small personal victory.

ELENA

It's not that our society is psychologically unprepared to accept gay pride parades, but we have a number of underdeveloped realms of civic society. Once our culture is more tolerant, we can change people's minds. I have experienced people changing their minds about things and telling me, "You and I get along and you seem normal to me." Right now I have Muslim clients, Chechens. On the one hand, I am comfortable enough working with them because they are very intellectual, modern people. On the other hand, I can't imagine telling

them about myself.

ELVINA

In 2011, we organized a winter sports festival—but apparently, we weren't careful enough. In the VKontakte group [a Russian social network], we listed the name of the recreation center in Solnechnogorsk where the event was going to take place. On the eve of the festival, people started sending anonymous letters to the municipal web site saying: "We won't allow a gay parade on our soil. We're rounding up troops and will come break it up."

The recreation center manager called me and told me the administration had told him that we were no longer allowed on their grounds because they "didn't want any problems." We got in touch with the director of the company that ran the place, and he said: "You have to understand that I don't care, but I got a phone call from the administration of the Moscow Region." We had two options: either cancel the event or find another location. We did the latter.

ELENA

I've been an LGBT activist since 1997. We had a non-profit in St. Petersburg called Labris. At that time, it was the only organization of its kind in St. Petersburg. Among other things we provided legal services. There was no Internet back then, so we would write letters, answer phone calls, organize public events. We translated and republished everything we could get our hands on. We also organized LGBT film screenings. But back then there wasn't as much persecution. The situation is much worse now.

—As told to Masha Charnay

WES HURLEY
"My life turned into a Pedro Almodóvar movie."

Wes moved to Seattle from Russia in his teens, and in 2005 he changed his name from Vasili Naumenko to the Americanized Wes Hurley, taking his partner's last name. Wes is an independent filmmaker, and is working on a feature film based on his early years as a Russian immigrant in the U.S.

I moved to the U.S. in 1997, when I was 16. We came to Seattle and fell in love with it. We've been here ever since. It was just me and my mom. We're not really close to the rest of my family. I grew up in Vladivostok. It's close to Japan, a half-hour drive from China. It's a big city but it's a very backward city. In Russia, it would have never even computed that I could meet somebody. I didn't think there was anybody else like me there. Maybe a few monsters, the "evil gays" people talked about, but that was all. I had reconciled that I would never meet anybody. I thought I was the only gay person there. After being gay in Vladivostok, at least back then, the next worst thing was to be Jewish. I'm not Jewish, but I had a Jewish friend, and he was also kind of in the closet in a way. You couldn't be "out" as a Jew.

It happened gradually, this idea to move to the States. It wasn't just one moment. After the Soviet Union fell apart, we started watching American movies, and started to get a sense that there's a different life out there. My grandmother would tell my mom all these horror stories about how bad it really is the U.S. That it's not like in the movies. But my mom was looking to get out. She was applying for the green card lottery in the U.S., and looking for job postings at hospitals around the world. She's a doctor.

So the way we ended up in the U.S. is that my Mom was a mail-order bride. She married my stepfather, and we found out once we got here that he was a crazy Christian fundamentalist nut, a Republican, really conservative. So that forced me to stay in the closet when we lived with him.

Then, gradually, he started to change a few years later, and we couldn't figure out what it was. I remember the first big surprise was when I moved into my own place, and my mom and my stepfather came by and he brought me a pumpkin. It was around Halloween. And we thought that was weird, because he used to say that Halloween was Satan's holiday. So my mom and I were both like:

“Wow, what’s changed?”

Then he came out as transgender to my mom, and eventually had the full sex change. And to give an idea of who my mom is, she stayed living with him for a few more years after that, as a friend, and she would go out singing karaoke with him and his trans friends.

So my life kind of turned into a Pedro Almodóvar movie. Now I’m working on a film about it all. Semi-autobiographical. Not sure how much mainstream appeal it will have, but I have some producers and a budget, and we’re talking about Carrie Fisher playing my grandmother.

About two years after they got married was around the same time I met Shawn. Back then, I was so desperate to have a boyfriend. I wanted to find out what that’s like. But I had no experience whatsoever.

At 18, I couldn’t go to bars, and I didn’t have gay friends my age. Also, I was super embarrassed about my accent. Conversationally, my accent was still really thick. I could tell sometimes people would just pretend to understand me, but they couldn’t really understand me. I was so excited to be in America. I felt that I was with people I wanted to meet, but the language barrier was really frustrating.

We met online. I responded to his personal ad on this website, Gay Seattle. I was super shy back then, and with my thick accent, really insecure. Online seemed to be the way to go. It was more comfortable. I was 18 and he was 34. I lied in my reply: he had posted a quote from some book on his profile, was asking people if they knew where it was from. So I bullshitted my way through it, told him I’d seen the quote before, that it was on the tip of my tongue. We chatted on the phone for a week or so. Then he went away for Christmas. Then we actually met for New Years. We spent the night together, and he asked me to move in the next morning. I didn’t officially move in; I kept paying the rent on my place, but I was basically at his place all the time.

I was super inexperienced, so it was just exciting to have somebody. Shawn was very well adjusted, just a good, solid man. He didn’t drink, he didn’t do drugs, he kept his life together. I think that’s what drew me to him. Also we liked each other for who we were. Back then, I felt like “the other” all the time. Most people didn’t know what to do with me, but the guys who were interested always had some kind of Russophile/foreigner fetish. Shawn is black so he’s had a similar experience with the majority of gay guys not being interested in him because he’s black, and most of the rest interested in him only because he’s black. It was refreshing to be with someone who didn’t care that I was foreign or Russian.

My mom was happy for me. Well, maybe she thought it was a bit

too fast, but she loved Shawn. When I moved in with Shawn it was around the same time that I stopped writing to my grandmother. She was still back in Russia. She'd always been very supportive about everything in my life, but she didn't know I was gay. But after I moved in with Shawn, I stopped writing to her, though I did send her a photo once of Shawn and me, and it's funny, she wrote back, and basically addressed Shawn, saying, "Whoever you are who kidnapped my grandson, let him read my letters!" So I finally wrote back and told her everything. That I was going to university to study art, which for her was probably as bad as me being gay. And that I was gay. And that my boyfriend was black. And I told her I totally understand if she doesn't want to be supportive, but this is my life and she has the choice to be a part of it or not. And she wrote back and said she wanted to keep being a part of it.

The last time she came to visit she stayed with Shawn and me. It was really cute, she really loved Shawn. He had tried to learn a little bit of Russian in school some years ago, and he knew a couple of phrases. But he made the mistake of saying those to her, so she assumed he spoke Russian and she would just come to him and talk and talk and talk to him for hours at a time. I told her, "He doesn't understand anything you say," and she would say, "You don't know, he speaks some Russian." She left Vladivostok a while ago and moved back to the city where she was from, right near Sochi, where they're having the Olympics.

My grandmother and I are still old fashioned. We still write hand-written letters to each other. And it's quite funny: now she writes me about how intolerant other people in Russia are and how she's trying to reform them. And she used to be the most closed-minded person herself.

Before Shawn and I broke up, I changed my name and took his last name. I knew I would change my name eventually. My father never really played a positive role in my life, and I thought it was sort of a stupid convention, but I waited until I become an American citizen. I was going to make something up, but I was with Shawn for eight years, so I decided to legally change my last name to his: Hurley. And people were already calling me Wes and Wesley since Americans couldn't pronounce Vasili, so it just gradually became my first name. I'm with a new partner now. He lives with me here with his dog. His name is Shawn too. The new boyfriend, not the dog. The dog's name is Archie.

—As told to Joseph Huff-Hannon

OLGERTA & LIZA*
"I had grey hair, but I felt like a 15-year-old boy."

Olgerta and Liza met five years ago at the Moscow Gay and Lesbian Archive. Created in the beginning of the 1990s, it holds several thousand items on the history of the LGBT movement in the Soviet Union and Russia. Almost fifteen years ago, Olgerta founded the radical feminist magazine Ostrov ["Island"], which comes out once every three months with a print run of two hundred copies. She can often be found in the Archive. Liza moved to Russia from Europe thirty years ago, and in Moscow she worked as a translator and teacher. She'd recently been through a difficult break-up, ending a long-term relationship, and that evening, her friends had invited her to the Archive to "talk about books."

LIZA

I was told that all the guests had to bring a present. So I brought something for the host and got comfortable in the kitchen. The first thing I noticed about her were her hands. The way they looked just floored me. I watched how they held a teacup, and thought about how I wanted to give myself over to these hands. I was smitten.

OLGERTA

I was almost 50—a respectable lady. I had been living with a woman for seven-and-a-half years. I thought the love we had was wonderful. Then, one evening, I was sitting in the kitchen and drinking tea. As usual when I drink tea, I was kind of massaging my cup. Suddenly, a girl I know stopped by with this red-haired woman.

I was very impressed with how well Liza spoke Russian. We started having a conversation and I saw that she was also an interesting person. It's rare to meet a woman who is so self-sufficient. I had a friend at that time who was very unhappy being single and had asked me to help find her a girlfriend. I looked at Liza and thought, here's a suitable candidate.

LIZA

At a certain point during the evening, it turned out that Olgerta and I lived near each other. She volunteered to go back to the neighborhood with me, which was nice because I didn't want to make that long trip from the Archive to my house by myself.

OLGERTA

We both lived outside of Moscow, on more or less the same train line, so we walked to the station together. We got on the same train, rode together for half an hour, and then I got off and switched trains.

LIZA

I was single at the time. The end of my previous relationship had a lot of ugly consequences. I lost almost all of my friends. And I had lost of a lot of people during the relationship itself. After the break-up I was dragged to all sorts of places. None of it appealed to me. When I was invited to the Archive, I was happy because I could finally start socializing, I could read something and talk about books. But I wasn't thinking about starting a new relationship.

OLGERTA

I really did want to set Liza up with my friend, but for some reason we couldn't arrange their meeting. It was like I was setting my friend up, but doing the dating myself. It was fun. I was becoming involved. And at one point I started writing her emails every day.

LIZA

She would intuit all of my interests and moods in her letters. I was completely amazed by them. I liked to read them as soon as I got to work.

OLGERTA

I got all tangled up in my relationships. I couldn't leave the woman I was with because she really hadn't done anything wrong. We both lived in my apartment. We had certain obligations to one another and I couldn't just kick her out. I had nowhere else to go. I had this grey hair, but I was so overwhelmed that I felt like a 15-year-old boy.

Christmas was coming up and I really wanted to get Liza a present. I went to half the stores in Moscow looking for jade because Liza's eyes are pure jade. I found a necklace. On December 25, I went to the Archive to give it to her. When I showed up, I saw that some other women were flirting with Liza. I felt like everything was falling apart.

LIZA

That was really something. I was sitting on a couch and talking to someone. Somebody had brought me a slice of cake and a cup of tea. Olgerta was so angry that someone had beat her to the punch. I saw this out of the corner of my eye, but didn't understand what was going on.

OLGERTA

We decided to have a soiree at our apartment outside of Moscow. A few friends would come over and we'd play guitar and sing. It was important to me that Liza come because I'd planned this whole pre-New Year's party so that Liza could see how I live and in order to spend time with her. But Liza wrote me to tell me that she would be on the jury for a film festival that day and wouldn't get off until late.

I was very upset by this and the idea of the soiree had completely lost its meaning. In response, I wrote that we needed to break off our

relationship. I sent that letter out on Friday, and on Sunday we were having friends over. I knew that she only checked her email at work so she wouldn't get it on Friday night. So I wasn't expecting anything.

LIZA

On Saturday I went to Gorky Park with my friends to go ice-skating. After that, we stayed too long at a café and I ended up missing my train. It had been a year since my big break up and I was finally making new friends. I ended up staying over at one of their houses. My friend started decorating her apartment and putting little Christmas trees everywhere. But I was so tired after ice-skating that I didn't partake in the festivities. Instead, I decided to check my email. I knew that for me to get Olgerta's letter Monday morning she would have had to write it Friday night. I opened the letter from Olgerta where she said that she was upset because without me the party had lost its meaning to her and now we should break off our relationship.

I was dumbstruck. I didn't know that I meant so much to her. I couldn't live without her letters. They made me feel like I was a little seed that was getting watered. I felt like I was growing and slowly starting to bloom. I couldn't imagine losing that.

I called Olgerta and told her I would try to come. The next day, after being on the jury, I ran away. I felt bad showing up empty handed, but I had received a beautiful rose as a member of the jury. And I thought that in the absence of any alternative, this would make a good present. The rose was of a rare color and had a long stem. It was December 28 and ten degrees below zero outside so I took the flower and hid it under my coat. To avoid damaging the flower, I couldn't bend or sit down. But then I had another problem; who would I give this rose to? I knew that I had to give it to the other woman, because if I gave it to Olgerta, there would be confusion.

OLGERTA

At the party, it became obvious that we couldn't stay apart. I walked her back to the train and took her hand when we had to cross the street. We kissed for the first time that evening, on the cheek.

We spent New Year's separately. My wife and I had tickets to go to Italy. We spent the night at the airport. When we were taking off, Masha finally asked, "What's going on with you?" Instead of saying anything, I broke down in tears. And she did, too.

We spent a week traveling through Italy. She saw that this was bigger than me. But it was all very hard. On January 10, we came back to Moscow and Masha went to sleep at her friend's house. I called Liza and invited her over. We've been together since then.

LIZA

For the last five years on the tenth of every month, she asks me, "Would you like to come over?"

OLGERTA

And for the last five years on the twenty-eighth of every month I get a rose.

—As told to Masha Charnay

ANTON* & GEORGY*
"We're not lying. We're just not telling them everything."

Anton and Georgy met in Moscow in 1995. Anton had just graduated from college with a degree in economics and finance. He landed his first job at a merchandising company. Georgy worked at the same company as a warehouse coordinator. Ten years prior, he'd moved to Moscow from Batumi, Georgia to go to school. Today, Anton, 41, is the financial manager at a construction company and Georgy, 42, heads the logistics division at a merchandising company. Three years ago, they had twins. Two boys.

ANTON

My friend got me hired. Georgy was also hired on someone's recommendation a little before me. We saw each other at work a lot. I had never been attracted to men from the Caucuses, but Georgy seemed interesting, although he didn't seem to notice me at all.

GEORGY

I tried to be careful at work. I was in charge of hundreds of people and it's not the kind of situation where you want to express your feelings.

ANTON

My friend told me that Georgy also liked men. I started trying to figure out how to approach him. I picked a moment when he was alone, came up to him, and asked him whether he wanted to go to the club with me. He said, "No, I don't." This was the end of our first romantic interaction.

GEORGY

He was always being sent over to me from the other department. I understood and felt that he was gay before he knew that about me. I really liked Anton, I liked the way he talked, the way he looked, the way he naively approached me and asked me out to the club. I didn't want to go out with him because, at that time, I was seeing someone else.

ANTON

Once, when I was walking home from work he came up to me and asked if we could go together. We didn't live far from each other. We struck up a conversation. That's how we started going home from work together. One day we were on the train and all the lights went off. Suddenly, I felt him put his arm around me and press me to him. After that, we slowly started dating. My feelings kept getting stronger.

But it was hard for Georgy to leave his boyfriend. He was really worried about hurting him.

GEORGY

I ended up breaking up with him and moving in with Anton. I thought that I was doing something really bad. I'd stopped having feelings for him, but I still felt responsible. Anton was the one I had real feelings for.

ANTON

One day we went out to the club. We didn't have any money for drinks. We bought alcohol at the store and, like normal dignified people, we'd go outside to drink on the street. Hanging out outside the club was the funnest part. We were talking to these girls there and one of them, Natasha, asked me to go to her parents' house and tell them I was her boyfriend. I asked her to do the same thing for me. After that, my parents believed I was living with Natasha.

Sometimes my parents would call me out of the blue and tell me that they were going to stop by. Georgy and I would have to urgently get a hold of Natasha. She would rush over and we would throw her clothes around the apartment. When my parents came over, the three of us would meet them. Georgy pretended to be a friend of ours who had just stopped in.

GEORGY

My parents don't know anything. My father had a stroke, and none of them were up to this kind of thing. For eight years, all of the strength and time my family had went toward his rehabilitation. No one was concerned with my personal life. My father died in 2005. My mother and I talk on the phone every other day and I go back to Georgia once a year. But my mother came to Moscow for the first time in fifteen or so years only last year. I don't talk to her about these things. Periodically, I tell her that I have a girlfriend. My relatives insist on my getting married, offering to introduce me to friends of friends and relatives. They worry a lot, of course. But I'll never tell my mother under any circumstances. That's what I decided. I know it would be a blow to her.

ANTON

We're just trying to look out for our parents. I'm very close to mine, but I have never told them about my sexual orientation. My parents really love me and I know that they would forgive me and understand. But they'd be very upset and blame themselves. I don't explain to them that it's not a matter of how they raised me. I'd rather go through that unpleasantness and take the sin of lying upon on my own soul, because at least they're happy in their ignorance.

GEORGY

We're not lying. We're just not telling them everything. We used

to be very upset about it, but now we're over it.

ANTON

We lived that way for a long time, playing that game, until Natasha asked us to marry her. I did it. We introduced our parents to each other. It went well, both of our parents are very tactful, no one asked any unnecessary questions. When we got our marriage license, our parents asked us to have a small dinner to celebrate our wedding. Then they wanted to invite grandma, aunt, uncle, and so on. It ended up that we had to go to the restaurant in five cars. Georgy was the witness. Our friends who had come to the wedding and knew the truth would go up to me and Georgy and give us money and congratulate us as though it were our wedding.

GEORGY

The bride's friends knew everything, too. Only the relatives were in the dark.

ANTON

However, when we started thinking about kids, Natasha said that she wasn't ready yet. That's when we decided to get a divorce. There were also a couple of legal reasons. Georgy and I wanted to buy an apartment and take out a loan. It was easier this way.

GEORGY

Natasha is still a very close friend of ours. We have a good relationship.

ANTON

After some time, we started talking about having children again. We had been together for thirteen years and decided that we were ready to become fathers. On Gay.ru, we saw an ad that a woman had put up, where it said that she was looking for men to have children with. We started corresponding and then met up. She turned out to be a very interesting person, a poet.

GEORGY

She explained that she really wanted children, that she was ready to become a mother. She wanted her child to have a father.

ANTON

At a certain point, when it came time to make a decision, I got a little scared and wanted to backpedal. Then we saw her again and she threw her arms around both of us. "Don't get scared. We don't need any dads but you."

We kept spending time together and growing closer. One day she called us and said, "I'm having twins." We were insanely happy. Soon, we had two boys.

Then it turned out that one of them was disabled. The doctors diagnosed him with achondroplasia. For a while, this really upset me. I didn't know what to do. I got depressed. It was hard on his mother,

too.

GEORGY

For the first three months, we spent all of our time with them. As soon as we got off work, we'd go see them. I bathed them, then we'd take turns swaddling them, and we wouldn't go home until they went to bed. Now they're three and a half. They're wonderful.

ANTON

They're in preschool, and they live with their mother during the week. My mother picks them up from preschool a lot of the time. We see them after work, when we go to their house, have dinner together, and put them to bed. They spend Saturdays at our house.

My parents think that this woman and I used to date and that's why we have these kids. They know I don't live with her and that I live with Georgy. I think that they probably suspect something by now, but they don't ask about it. It's like "don't ask, don't tell."

GEORGY

I believe we're raising our kids so it won't be hard for them to figure out what their family is like. They're already very smart. We're going to do everything to make sure that they're free, normal boys. But I don't want to think about the future yet, because one of our sons has serious health issues and he has to undergo a series of surgeries. He's an amazing boy. Bright, artistic, witty. The biggest problem for us is his health.

ANTON

If it weren't for his health problems, we'd be the happiest people alive.

GEORGY

It may be too early to talk about this, but I really want to have a daughter. I drive around and imagine how amazing it would be if they had a sister. I'd be so happy.

ANTON

In all of the eighteen years that we've been together we haven't had one serious fight. It used to be that we'd argue and I'd run out of the house. Georgy would always run after me and find me. I have never had any doubt that he would come after me and I never really wanted to run away from him. I have always been amazed with Georgy's generosity, and with how beautifully and broadly he sees the world.

GEORGY

This is probably what it means to have real feelings. We knew from the very beginning that we were right for each other; I think it's because of this that we still have such strong feelings. Sometimes, we're even embarrassed to say how long we've been together.

—As told to Masha Charnay

ALYONA & OLGA
"The nurse looked around and realized that I was the father."

Alyona and Olga decided to share their story in honor of their eighth anniversary. They met in Ekaterinburg, where they live to this day. Olga was 21 and Alyona was 23. Both of them were finishing school. Alyona is a quality-control engineer, and Olga was studying at the department of public relations. Today, they run a business together, an Internet toy store. Olga is also the head of the advertising department for a chain of fitness centers. Two years ago, they had a son.

ALYONA

We met online, on Lesbi.ru. This was before Vkontakte [popular Russian social networking site] or Odnoklassniki [same]. It didn't have photos, but there were no other options for meeting back then. I asked Olga out a number of times, even inviting her to meet up with me and a third person, but she kept saying no.

OLGA

I was in a relationship at that time and it was falling apart. I had been with my girlfriend at the time for almost three years. Alyona and I literally only exchanged messages a couple of times. Then my relationship got very sad. I thought, "Should I write to that beautiful stranger?"

We decided to meet in front of a popular café. I was early. I went up to the café and saw a short butch girl. She was holding a cigarette in one hand and a bottle of beer in the other. I went up to her and she said, "Cool. Now we have to walk one of my friends to the train." I was shocked, but agreed. When we were walking her friend to the train, I had these feverish thoughts trying to figure out how I would run away from this terrifying date. Then we decided to go back to the café.

ALYONA

I go up to the café and see two girls approaching. The butch one was a friend of mine, but the second one I'd never seen before. I understood immediately that it was Olga, whom I had come to meet.

OLGA

I remember exactly how Alyona's eyes looked in that moment. And her smile. She looked at me and then at her. The girl with the beer also figured out that there had been a misunderstanding and burst out laughing. I sighed, relieved that I wouldn't have to run away after all.

ALYONA

It turned out that that girl was also waiting to meet up with someone, but we didn't get the details. We went to the café, sat for a little while, and then we went our separate ways.

OLGA

We started seeing each other practically every day under various pretexts. We traded films, books. Once, I asked Alyona to come to a café and we had a romantic moment. This was the first time we touched. I was wearing these warm, lined pants, and Alyona brushed my hip.

ALYONA

I had the exact same pants, but made from a different material. I wanted to feel the cloth. Although, of course, this was an excuse to touch her.

OLGA

A few weeks later, my girlfriend and I finally broke up. That day I called Alyona and invited her over. She came. Since then, we've lived together.

For three years we lived without fighting, but then Alyona fell in love with someone else. This was a major blow for me. I was so upset, I went blind in one eye. Apparently, I just didn't want to see any of this.

ALYONA

I just fell in love and flew away. But that relationship didn't last long. My feelings passed pretty quickly. I felt very guilty toward Olga.

OLGA

Alyona came to pick me up from work and we talked sitting in the car. I don't remember the details of our reconciliation. That was five years ago.

A few years later, after I got a promotion at work, we started talking about having children. We decided that because she was older, Alyona should be the one to give birth. At the clinic, no one was particularly interested in the nature of our relationship. We went to the embryologist together. This wonderful lady came out with a day planner. She didn't ask any questions or make us fill out any forms. She just looked at us and said, "It'd probably be good if the baby looked like both of you. I have a cute one! It'll be perfect." That autumn, we had our first attempt at artificial insemination from a sperm donor, and it was successful.

ALYONA

We didn't consider the option of having a father because we didn't want to have a person passing through our lives. Before I got pregnant, I was very anxious about the responsibility we were taking on. When I got pregnant, that went away. I knew that we were going

to have a boy. I dreamed that I was touching my belly and feeling a boy in there. I watched him grow; he was a year old, and then in the last image, he was our grown son, a college student.

OLGA

I watched over the pregnancy. I kept diaries, photographed her belly. We went in for every ultrasound together. We decided that I should be present for the birth and so we went to childbirth classes at the Center for the Protection of Mothers and Infants. We were the only lesbian couple, but no one asked us questions. If it weren't for Alyona's belly, no one would have been able to tell which one of us was pregnant.

ALYONA

I wasn't worried about the medical aspect at all because I knew that Olga was taking care of everything, so I was completely calm about it. My parents supported us a lot, too. My mother knit baby clothes.

OLGA

When it was time to have the baby, we took Alyona to the hospital. A doctor came into her room and asked me to step outside.

ALYONA

My water broke, and the doctor started panicking, screaming, "The hand's fallen out!" I got very scared. It was very painful. Then it turned out that it was the umbilical cord. They immediately rushed me into the operating room.

OLGA

I heard all these screams. I was terrified. I saw how the doctors wheeled the cardiogram machine in and out of the room and knew that something was wrong. Then they took Alyona out of the room and she rolled past me. We were both crying.

ALYONA

I was very happy to see Olga. I was scared at first. I didn't know where she had gone. I felt better that she knew where they were taking me.

OLGA

I sat down by the doors of the operating room. Ten minutes later, I heard the newborn scream. When I came in, he was lying on a little table and the nurse was cleaning him. I took out my phone and started making a video. She swaddled him and gave him to me to hold. For five minutes, everyone had gone and I was alone with him. I will never forget that. I remember his eyes, the way he was crying. I was kissing him, telling him how long we've been waiting for him and how much we love him.

Then they took him away and I had to leave. I left Alyona the telephone with the video and a message that she should watch it when

she came to. I left the hospital in total shock; I didn't know what to do or where to go. I called Alyona's mother and then just wandered around the city.

ALYONA

I woke up a few hours later. At first, I didn't understand what was going on, but then the doctors told me that the baby was fine and gave me my phone. I watched the video like five hundred times. We named our son Georgy. Gosha, for short.

OLGA

Alyona and Gosha were transferred to a different unit on the first floor. For the next several days, I would go up to the window and Alyona would show him to me through the glass. On the sixth day, they were finally discharged. I came to pick them up with presents and cakes for all the doctors. The nurse came out, looked around, and realized that I was the father and gave me the baby. We got in the car and went home.

ALYONA

We've never encountered any homophobia. We run our business out of our home. A lot of people come over and they see that we share a bed. Everyone knows everything. At preschool, the teachers get it, too.

OLGA

Everyone at my work knows about my life. It's harder with my parents. They're divorced. I don't talk to my mother very often. Gosha was two years old before she ever saw him. I didn't talk to my father for almost ten years until he found out that I was living with a woman and that we have a son. For him, this came as a major shock because he is very conservative. But he was eager to be part of our lives and support us. Since then, we've been seeing each other.

ALYONA

We're thinking about having a second child. This time, Olga will be the one who gets pregnant. But I'm very worried again. Our apartment is too small for four people. We'll have to figure something out before we have the baby. Take out a mortgage.

OLGA

We've already had two insemination attempts. So far it's been unsuccessful. But I decided ahead of time that we're not going to take any breaks. We're determined to move forward and have three kids. We are optimistic and believe that everything will turn out OK.

—As told to Masha Charnay

OLGA KURACHYOVA
“After we broke up, I felt the fear dissipate.”

OLGA K + GALIYA

Galiya and I met in May 2010. In July, we moved in together. In August, we had a wedding in Kazantyp.

People get married at the Kazantyp festival, which happens every year in the Crimea. There are posters all over the festival grounds that say that on this day there will be this kind of wedding. You have to show up early and sign up for it. There are no restrictions; you don’t need to show them any documents, you just need to give them your real or fake names. Then you’re pronounced spouses, asked to kiss, and issued a Kazantyp wedding certificate.

In some ways this was, of course, a joke wedding. But since we wouldn't be able to get legally married anyway, it was a real enough occasion for us.

Before we got married and even before we moved in together, one day, while I was lovingly looking at Galiya, I suddenly realized that I wanted to have her children. I didn't say anything and was startled by the thought, which seemed completely out of place at that time. No matter how hard they try, two women can't conceive a child without outside help. Sperm banks, donors, and adoption weren't yet on my mind. This was the second same-sex relationship I had ever been in. My first experience was a deep, dark secret that only my very closest friends knew about. With Galiya, it was immediately clear that this time it was serious.

Incidentally, I am genuinely glad that we met when we were 23 and not, say, 13. I had several phases of overcoming internalized homophobia that went on for months at a time. At first, I would only tell close friends about my new relationship, then various random acquaintances, and then I finally told my parents. Eventually, I began writing about it on social networking sites and became an LGBT activist. Galiya started dating girls when she was a teenager, but it wasn't until she met me that she came out to her mother, telling her about me and about what her earlier girlfriends had really been.

At a certain point, we started talking about having children together. We wanted at least three: two that we would give birth to, and one adopted from an orphanage. At first, we couldn't imagine how we would raise our children in a homophobic state, and from time to time we would talk about moving to some cozy civilized country. But these thoughts were hard to swallow. I would always ask myself, "Why should we have to move just because our government is stupid?"

The mass demonstrations after the 2011 Duma elections gave us hope. After coming out publicly, we felt safe. In the summer of 2012, I said I wouldn't be afraid to give birth even in this fascist country. We existed in a big, beautiful gay-friendly bubble; it would protect us.

By the end of 2012 and beginning of 2013, all of that fearlessness was gone. The law banning "the propaganda of homosexuality" had already led to some terrible consequences: in various Russian cities, under various circumstances, there have been attacks on bisexuals, lesbians, gays, the transgendered and gender queer-everyone whose sexual orientation or gender identity is not the status quo. The initiative to introduce a law that would take away the parental rights of all individuals who "practice an untraditional sexual orientation," in the words of the Duma deputies, is so monstrous that it's frightening to think about its potential consequences.

In the summer of 2013, I found myself in the grips of terror. I was overcome with pervasive, all-consuming panic. I didn't know what to do. Should I pack my suitcases and apply for visas? Stay in Russia and fight? And what about children—when and where would I be able to have them?

We had already told one of our friends that we wanted to have a child by him. He even agreed. It wasn't a done deal, but we'd been discussing how the three of us would raise a child together. However, a year after we began talking about it, I realized I was completely unprepared to even think about having a child in today's Russia.

I talked about this to my friends, and they all asked, "Olga, do you really think that they're going to come after two women that aren't even registered as a family, who are just living together, and seize their children?" I told them, "Could we have imagined a year ago that people would spend a year in pre-trial detention just for showing up to Bolotnaya Square to protest like we had?"

In July 2013, Galiya and I suddenly broke up. At first, I couldn't get used to it. I was completely disoriented. At the same time, I felt the fear beginning to dissipate, which came as a complete surprise. I no longer had to think about the issue of having children as a single-sex family in this fascist situation at this point in my life. It's painful to write about this, to talk about it and even think about it, but at that time, I was genuinely relieved.

I'm still upset about the plight of single-sex families with children in Russia. I'm very afraid for LGBT teens. But worrying about others and trembling with fear for your own family are very different things.

Galiya and I are on excellent terms right now and, as it turns out, great friends. We support each other and advise each other on all sorts of things. We don't regret anything and know that everything between us was for the best.

I am queer. I fall in love with a person's soul, and am completely indifferent to their gender identity. Neither the fascist laws, nor what my mother would have wanted, nor anything else can hold any sway over my heart.

I still want three children. I don't know what kind of family I will have them in—a homosexual one, or a heterosexual one, or perhaps I will have them on my own. I understand full well that if I end up having a husband, there will be nothing threatening our family. If I do it alone, it might be difficult, but at least it won't be frightening. But if I have a wife, I will once again find myself in a horrifying, vulnerable position. And then, it will have to be suitcases, the station, and emigration for us.

ALLA GORIK
"I always ask her how her new girlfriend is, and aren't I better?"

Alla Gorik, 27, has short blonde hair, a constant wry smile on her face, and a-matter-of-fact way of speaking. We met at a happy hour in New York organized by Rusa LGBT, a network of Russians and Russian speakers who meet up regularly for socializing—or to demonstrate in front of the Russian consulate, depending on the circumstances. It was Alla's first time joining one of these gatherings, and she marveled at how many Russian gays and lesbians there were in New York, her new home.

I moved to New York in May of 2012, though I'd visited once before, in 2009. I'm from Khabarovsk, a city in the Far East. I was bored. I'd been living there so long. Where I'm from you're considered an old maid if you're 25 and aren't married and don't have children. I was living with my girlfriend, Ira, when I decided it was time to leave, but she didn't want to go. We kept applying for visas to come to the U.S.; I kept getting approved but she didn't. This happened three times. Now that I'm here and she's there, Ira's still trying to convince me to come back, but that's not happening.

We were together for two years; I'm not quite sure what we are now. We're together but we're open, and I keep telling her to come over here but she won't do it. At least now she finally got a passport so maybe we're getting closer. But I think Ira would only come if I went back and got her. She's like that; she needs to be pushed along.

We met at a birthday party. Back then I was the quiet one. I didn't go out much, stayed at home on the computer. At the party Ira came up to me. She was very arrogant, like a warrior. She put her legs on my lap, and made me stay the night. But then things changed. After we moved in together it started being me who made all the decisions.

We bought two cats together. Hairless cats. They were like Ira's kids. We had our own place back then, but now Ira lives with my mom and the cats. My mom is cool, though. Her attitude is, "If you're not crying, we're good." When I was 23, my mom called and asked me if I was a lesbian. The way I answered was a few days later I brought Ira home. My mom would joke sometimes that we must have met in jail, especially after I got my tattoo. I've never been in jail, by the way. I'm really lucky with my mom. I had two colleagues back home who were fired after word got around that they were gay. One of them

was disowned by her mother after that.

Here in New York, I work in technical support for a web company. It's owned by Russians. I've been there for a little over a year now. Even though I work with a bunch of Russians, none of them knows I'm gay. They all came here during the Soviet Union times so they still have that mentality. Sometimes, I want to tell them just to scandalize them.

I had another girlfriend here but it didn't last too long. Three months. But I still talk to Ira basically every day, so let me tell you about her. She's thin, that's the most important part. She likes computer games; she's a real maniac about them. And she loves cars. She redesigns them. Classic cars. She just bought her second one. And she's a hairstylist: she cuts guys' hair. She's also a total gym nut. She's always sending me photos of her six pack. I tell her it's too much, women shouldn't have so many muscles.

She was married at one point, quite young, at 17. She lived in a small village, and the guy she married, she told him she was a lesbian but he said he didn't care. When they were married, Ira was always with other girls, and he was always yelling about it. But he was warned. He knew the conditions in advance. He can't really complain.

I always ask her how her new girlfriend is, and aren't I better? She doesn't say anything though. Just moves on. At the end of every sentence I ask her: "Why are you over there? Come over here to be with me!" She tells me to stop it, that she's still thinking it over, but she's had almost two years to think it over! When I left she cried and asked me to stay and wait for her to apply one more time. I told her I'm already 26, how much longer could I wait?

I applied for asylum, but my hearing isn't scheduled for almost another two years, because there's such a long waiting list in New York. So if I get asylum that's when I'll go back and try to convince Ira to come here, though I'll probably have to go to Ukraine so she can meet me there, since I won't be able to enter Russia. My lawyer told me it's best to apply now, since things are so bad in Russia. He says they could get better soon. I disagree. I don't think things will be getting better anytime soon.

Back home I have some good friends, a couple, two women with a young son. They're worried the government will take him away, so they're not sending him to preschool. They don't want him telling the teachers he has two moms. A lot of my friends who can are moving to St. Petersburg. At least there it's a little more cultured. A big city.

Another friend, a guy you can tell is gay—he gets beaten up all the time. When I left he had stitches in his face. He worked at a telecom company and when he was up for a promotion there was another co-worker angling for the same promotion. So he told the boss

my friend was gay. Instead of getting a promotion he was asked to resign.

I asked him why doesn't he leave, why not apply for asylum in Europe? He told me he doesn't want to learn a new language. It's a Russian character trait, to complain and complain but not do anything about it. Not me; I got out of there.

—As told to Joseph Huff-Hannon

GLEB LATNIK
"I dream one day I'll have a little apartment, someone I love, and people who come over and see us."

Gleb Latnik, 30, moved to Moscow last summer. He was invited by fellow LGBT activist Alexei Davydov because life was no longer safe for him in his hometown. Soon after Gleb moved, Alexei died suddenly. Several days before this conversation, Gleb had returned from a three-day trip to the United States for Russian LGBT activists organized by the State Department. Despite his friends' encouragement, he didn't even consider staying in America. The first thing I noted when we met was a small scar on his childlike face. It was a mark left by the hooligans who had beaten him up. A small rainbow flag was pinned to the worn strap of his bag. He smells like alcohol and unwashed clothes. This is the odor of a hard life, full of one-man pickets, being chased, hospitals, and during temporary breaks, finding the resources to survive.

I'm from Pervouralsk. It's a small town, with a population of 125,000, near Ekaterinburg. That's where I became an LGBT activist. On June 11, when the Duma passed the law on gay propaganda, I went out in the main square with a sign that said "I'm against the second law of the scoundrels" [The first "law of the scoundrels" is the prohibition on American citizens adopting Russian orphans]. It had a rainbow sun on it. They refused to print my sign at the print shop. They told me it was extremist, so I ended up making it myself. I came out into the square and stood there for an hour. I got the most attention from journalists who even got in the way of my talking to people. About five passersby stopped and asked me questions. The rest stayed away from me.

I was the only one out in Pervouralsk, but no one even went out into the street in Ekaterinburg. I ended up rousing the local LGBT activists, asking them what the point was in sitting around together talking about our problems. We did a series of one-man pickets, although the press paid no attention to us. I saw that we needed a more controversial space to protest. We found it: it was the Inoprom Expo, an international industrial show. We prepared a shocking, bloody performance to do in front of the entrance. I wrote about it on my personal web outlets and social networking sites. Then a man showed up to my house. My mother let him in. I wasn't home. He said he was police, but he didn't show any documents and started asking

where I was and when I am usually around. For several days, there was a car parked outside our house, and I stopped coming home or discussing any specific meeting points with anyone on the phone because I knew they could be listening.

Then I ended up messing up and naming a meeting spot after all. I showed up and was detained by people from the Center for Extremism Prevention [a notoriously brutal branch of the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs] and taken down to the station. We spoke for a long time and they demonstrated that they knew the kinds of things about me that I myself no longer remembered. They politely explained that if this was the government policy, resisting it would cause problems for me: my relatives would turn away from me; I'd find it hard to find a job.

Then they let me go. Several days later, on July 13, we demonstrated in front of the entrance to the expo. These were several one-man pickets with people holding signs that read, "Homophobic Policies Untie the Hands of Murderers," with a picture of a person with a rainbow tear on their face. As soon as we rolled out our posters, the police attempted to arrest us, but the lawyers who were there with us intervened just in time.

The people who spoke to me at the station turned out to be right. My mother ended up telling me that she wanted a calm life and asked me to move out. My brother stopped talking to me. He knew I was gay before and it was never a problem. Our relationship was ruined by my activism.

Several days after the expo protest, I got a terrible headache and my arm started going numb, as did the whole left side of my body. I called an ambulance and it was a good thing I did because the doctor told me I'd had a mini-stroke. I think it was from psychological strain. I spent several days in the hospital. I would go from the hospital to my friend's house. I was keeping my things there and staying there.

One evening, I was going back there when I ran into two men. They recognized me, they'd probably seen me on TV. They were clearly drunk and started harassing me. They threw me down on the ground, kicked me in the face, and broke my glasses. I ran away from them and then spent two more weeks in the hospital. A journalist friend of mine told me that the nationalists were after me. That's a lot more serious than some random hooligans. That's when Alexei Davydov, the LGBT activist from Moscow, called me. We'd been close friends online. He invited me to come stay with him. When I got out of the hospital, I left town right away. On August 27, I arrived in Moscow.

Me, Alexei, and his friend Roman, who had also been kicked out of his house, were all renting a one-bedroom apartment in

Novogireevo. Alexei had kidney problems and was getting dialysis. I got a job selling SIM cards, Roma was transcribing protocols from the Bolotnaya Square trials, and Alexei was on disability, so we had enough to live on.

We staged a couple more protests this fall. When they were discussing the passage of the laws that will take away the parental rights of same-sex couples, we stood by the Duma dressed up as doctors with signs that said we were offering psychiatric help to Duma representatives. On September 25, we protested by the Olympic committee headquarters, demanding that there be a pride house in the Olympic Village in Sochi, as there is in other countries. I was late to this protest and by the time I showed up, the police transport vans were already there and everyone had been arrested. It's always the same thing after we get arrested. They take us to the station, process us for administrative violations, hold us for a few hours, and then release us.

Exactly a month later, on September 27, Alexei's condition began deteriorating rapidly. He came home from dialysis and lost consciousness. We took him to the hospital, and three days later, he died in the ICU. Looking at his chart, I think that he was killed by the doctors, who didn't actually perform hemodialysis like they said. After Alexei's death, we weren't able to stay in the apartment in Novogireevo and had to move. Now, a friend and I are renting a small one-bedroom house in the village of Drozdovo, which is only twenty minutes outside of Moscow on the train.

Alexei, Roma, and I were all just friends. I'm single. Three years ago, I was in a relationship with a man, Sergei, who had lived with another man for twelve years before that. From the very beginning, I knew that if they'd been together that long, they were probably only broken up temporarily and would get back together sooner or later. This happened six months later; Sergei went back to his boyfriend. I haven't been in a serious relationship since. It's very easy to find sex in Moscow, but I don't understand the point of having sex with strangers, like how some people go to the back rooms of clubs to do. That's not for me. I have a lot of friends online, but only two friends in real life. They're both from the Urals, like me.

Most of all, I want a partner. I would like to walk with him down the street holding hands, unafraid of anything. In America, I realized the problem isn't homophobia but the gay community itself. We need to work on the LGBT community and not society at large. People need to start coming out of the closet so that there are as many openly gay people as possible or else nothing is going to change.

It's very hard to find work. I studied to be a chef. I've worked in food service for many years. I know the kitchen inside and out. I can

do anything from washing the dishes to running the place. I can't find a job in my field. It seems like potential employers Google me, see that I'm an activist, and decide not to hire me. At one place, they told me outright, "What if you're arrested and can't come to work?" I used to work for a company that sold printing supplies and accessories; then I sold SIM cards. I never get hired anywhere and I'm starting to think that maybe I should have listened to my friends who told me to get out of here. But for now, I don't think it's critically dangerous for me or that I need to flee. It could get worse after the Olympics. They're starting to talk about criminal penalties [as opposed to just fines] for gay propaganda. My money is running out and I don't really know what I'm supposed to do next.

If it gets really bad and nationalists start showing up to my door I can move to Poland. My father is Polish so I could apply for repatriation. It would be better than being a refugee in America, especially since the Polish language and culture are closer to me. Ideally, I'd like to open a café. I'd like to have a little apartment on top of it. I don't need much. I would like to have a partner, someone I love. I want people to come over and sit with us drinking wine. I've thought about children, too, but I haven't pictured myself as a father yet. Maybe because I've gotten used to the thought that I will never have kids.

—As told to Karen Shainyan

ALEXANDER & MIKHAIL
"Neither of us wanted to part, not then, not later, and never again."

ALEXANDER + MIKHAIL

Alexander, 38, and Mike, 30, have been in the U.S. for only a few months, but they hope to never have to return to Russia. They've filed an asylum claim requesting permanent residence in the country, and are now waiting out the days for a decision.

We met on a dating website. It was November 26, 2010.

Mikhail mentioned that he wasn't ready to meet for dating or anything serious. But it was the same for me. I just had in mind meeting up to talk. Nothing serious. It was the pictures of his dogs that caught my eye. I remember I asked him about them, what kind of dogs they were, because I love dogs. That's how the conversation started. I was working as an administrative assistant at the time, so I didn't like going back and forth on email. All these long messages about nothing. So I asked him to meet.

The next day it was cold and snowy. We'd made a date and then almost at the last minute he was trying to cancel, but he wouldn't explain why. We texted all day and finally he agreed to meet. Later I found out it was because he was broke. But being independent, he didn't want anyone pay for him.

Finally we met in the center of Moscow near the Tverskaya metro. I got in his car and there was this feeling that we'd known each other for many years. There was no discomfort or anything, none of that awkwardness there is sometimes when two people meet for the first time. We went to a restaurant close to his work. We didn't notice the time fly as we sat there until the restaurant closed. We moved to a twenty-four-hour café to continue our conversation. That night we told each other everything about ourselves, not hiding or whitewashing anything. Neither of us wanted to part, not then, not later, and never again.

At the end of the night we didn't want to leave each other but it wasn't a fairy tale either. Mike was in a relationship and didn't have his own apartment, and neither did I. At the time, I was renting a small room with a roommate. Neither of us were happy with the idea of living apart and having an affair. Mike's relationship had gone sour a long time ago. The next morning, we decided that he was going to move in with me. I picked him up that evening and since then, we've lived together and haven't left each other's side even for a day.

At that point I already had tickets to DC for December 8, to go visit a friend. There was no question: Mike had to go with me. It was the first visit to the U.S. for both of us. It was very difficult to buy him tickets and get a visa on such short notice. My friend we were visiting told us to bring suits because there would be a special event. The day after our arrival we went to this event, something we never thought we would see. It was a wedding, one of the first gay weddings in Washington, DC.

And it was amazing. One of the guys was Russian, and his husband was from Texas, a typical American, a big burly guy. The wedding was like the ones in the movies, with limos, romantic vows, beautiful guests, and happy American parents, at the National Cathedral. The reception was at a glamorous hotel. It turned out that Mike had dreamed of it since childhood, and was sure that it would never happen because of Russian culture and its laws. Seeing that it was possible made a big impression on him. Not least, he was moved by the smiles from the people on the streets, some of whom even stopped to congratulate the grooms. There was not a single malicious gaze or gesture in their direction. People behaved just as people do when they usually see two people in love getting married: they were smiling, happy for them! That's when Mike asked me to marry him. I

said yes.

The next day, on December 10, we went to apply for a marriage license. They approved us, but the closest date we could get was December 17. We didn't spend any time waiting or testing our relationship. December 17 is our anniversary. We had lot of friends telling us not to do it, to think of all the future problems we might have in Russia, but we ignored them. We couldn't explain it; it just felt right. We both knew it was that we wanted.

After that we went on a honeymoon to Miami for a week, driving there and back. It was crazy, a really long drive, and there was a big blizzard. When we got back to DC, Mike found out he'd been fired. His colleagues had somehow found out he'd gotten married, probably from Facebook, since he'd posted some of our wedding pictures. He was happy, and he wanted to share that with his friends. He'd been working in the marketing department of a major TV network. While we were in Miami they sent him an email telling him that he no longer had a job.

When we got back to Moscow everything was awful. Terrible weather, everybody unfriendly, a general gloom over everything. We had nowhere to live and Mike was out of a job. We ended up finding an apartment with a new roommate; he was wonderful, everybody loved him. We all lived together for a year and then he was murdered. The details are still shady and nobody knows exactly what happened that night. He was back in his hometown visiting his parents. That Monday, we were supposed to go hang out with his boyfriend, whom he'd planned to marry in Europe that fall. Sunday morning, they found him on the road not far from his house with a shattered skull. No one knows what happened. They say that he came out to someone. The police didn't really bother to investigate. We couldn't live there anymore, everything in that apartment reminded us of this wonderful person. It was too hard.

In February 2011, Mike started up his own business, and it was growing fast. In the summer of 2013, the Russian government closed down the international organization I was working for, and I became temporarily unemployed. About a month later, people from the Federal Security Agency, the FSB, came around and started asking me questions. They basically asked me to apply for another position at my old job and be their person on the inside.

Back when I was employed, our organization's security services could have taken care of this kind of thing, but now it made me nervous. The following week they visited Mike at his office and tried to intimidate him into pressuring me to do it. They explained that they knew everything about our relationship and that we were married. Then they returned to me, trying to scare me, telling me the

trouble we could both get into if I didn't agree to work for them. They explained very clearly that the new laws would make it "no problem" to arrest us. From there, it was not far from the courts, especially considering the fact people like us "should be shot anyway."

No one expected it to escalate from words to deeds. A few days later, Mikhail was kidnapped and beaten up, threatened with a gun, and dropped off in a Moscow park. He wasn't robbed. They didn't take his money or even his phone, they just switched it off. The men who attacked him told him that he needed to pressure me to do what I needed to do. That's when we decided to get out as soon as possible. Now we are in the States, and no matter what happens, we are hoping for the best.

Before all of that happened, this new law had just seemed absurd. It doesn't work. It can't work. However, as the FSB agents explained to me, they can use it against us. After all, as a gay couple, we're a walking violation, the propaganda for, as they call it, "nontraditional sexual relations." It turns out that in Russian society and under the present administration, loving each other is nontraditional. What the government wants, and is getting, out of the anti-gay law is to turn the public against gays and lesbians as a group.

I'm not sure what impact it has on our day-to-day lives. We're not activists, we're not going to Pride. I don't know if that's good or bad, but that's us. And it's not just this law. It's so many other things that wear you down. For example, I tried to get another bank card for Misha—not a credit card, just a debit card—for access to my own money. It was impossible! The tellers simply had to know why I wanted to let this guy use my account. Why is it their business how I use my money? Even when you have money, you still can't have a normal life. It's crazy.

Russia has a lot of problems. One of the biggest ones is the general lack of human rights for its citizens. Only the government has rights. Many groups of people have none at all: the elderly, children in orphanages, the incarcerated. This law is a tool for manipulating the public. It's supposed to make people think that gays want something special—special rights, special relationships, special marriages. It's being used to distract people from all of the other problems in our country.

Before the FSB intervened, we were living our lives. We had our problems like anyone else, which were made worse by the owners of the apartment that we were renting, kicking us out when they saw that we shared a bed. Otherwise, Mike worked. Sometimes we went out to bars on the weekend. We had a few friends, but we had kind of left our previous life behind. The life we each had before we met each other. So we didn't have a ton. But we went out, went to the movies.

We liked to drive out into the country. Normal stuff.

People always say good relationships never come from a dating website. But look at us, we met online, and neither of us was looking for a relationship. It happens, there's a spark. If you meet the person you want to live with, who you love, you have to fight for it.

—As told to Joseph Huff-Hannon

TATIANA ERMAKOVA
“I had a career in Russia, a nice apartment, friends, family. I sacrificed all that to be with Ana.”

TATIANA + ANA

I was born and grew up in Saratov, Russia. It’s a provincial town, built on a mix of old-fashioned Orthodox Christian values (which condemned homosexuality as a sin) and Soviet beliefs (when most people thought that homosexuality didn’t exist in the Soviet Society at all).

Both of my parents worked, and I was on my own a lot. I was a good kid, though. I did my homework, stayed home, and didn’t get into trouble. I was also shy and sometimes had a hard time socializing. My father was a history professor at the university, and my mom worked for a non-profit organization.

They were educated, intelligent, and generally very good people, but they were still very homophobic. My dad always made sure to explain that “homosexuals are rich perverts who are so overindulged in pleasures that they turn to unnatural acts for entertainment.” I’m not sure why my father thought that all gays were supposed to be rich. Maybe he implied that average people like us would never need

to even consider engaging in such acts. And my mom called homosexuality “a grave sin that brings nothing but shame and despair to a family.” It was the only education I received about same-sex love as a child. Needless to say, it caused me a lot of anxiety once the realization that I might be gay finally hit me.

That happened when I was 15. It was in 1994, right after Russia went through a series of democratic reforms. Russia was getting pretty liberal at that time, and they even started talking about same-sex relationships in the media, something that had never happened before. I remember watching a late-night talk show when they announced their next topic: “Lesbians.” The host talked a little bit about what lesbians were, and then she announced statistics, something that just shook me to the core: “On average, one out of ten women is a lesbian.” At that moment, I didn’t know a single girl who was a lesbian. But I surely knew nine straight girls. And it made me think that the tenth, the lesbian girl, could just as well be me. I know it was weird logic, but I’d had a crush on a girl from my class since I was thirteen, so it all suddenly started to make sense. It was like I discovered that I had an illness; maybe not a fatal one, but one without a cure. But then I started finding more information about lesbians, and it didn’t sound too bad. I remember reading an article in a magazine about Martina Navratilova (the tennis player) and Madonna (the singer), claiming that they were lesbians (or bisexual, in Madonna’s case). They were the only lesbians that I’d heard of at that time, and I was amazed by how talented, beautiful, and successful they were. I wanted to be just like them.

And I really wanted to find a girlfriend, but I was afraid to talk about it to the girls I knew. I always hid my sexual orientation in Russia, even when I went to the university. I didn’t meet anybody openly gay on campus. Even though singers and ballet dancers were allowed to be gay in Russia, ordinary people preferred to hide it the best they could. But I tried to concentrate on my studies and just not to think about it. I graduated and then enrolled in a post-graduate program, and got a job as an assistant professor at the International Economics Department, at Saratov State Socio-Economic University.

I was happy about my professional life, but my personal life was turning into a disaster. I was 22, and still single. My parents, who didn’t bother me about not having a boyfriend before, suddenly came to the conclusion that I was getting too old and it was time for me to get married. Russians usually marry young: my older sister got married when she was 18; my older brother married when he was 21. Graduation from college was considered to be “the time” to find a spouse and settle down. I didn’t come out to my parents, remembering their homophobic remarks and very anti-gay attitude. But most

important, I didn't want to disappoint them. And I knew that the announcement that they had a lesbian daughter would be devastating. They were always so proud of me, for being such a good student and a good daughter, and they did so much for me. I felt like I owed them to be straight.

My parents, all our other relatives, their friends, and even neighbors were putting a lot of pressure on me to find a husband. My mother had a long conversation with me, saying that it wasn't normal not to be married or at least have a boyfriend at that age, and insisting that I must have some "emotional or physical retardation" if I wasn't interested in men. She told me I had to either find a husband or see a doctor, so I decided to make my best effort and dated a guy my family had set me up with, but that failed miserably. We dated for all of two months, and then I told him the truth, that I was gay. He said I wasted his time, that he didn't want to see me ever again, but promised not to tell anybody about why we broke up. I never wanted to date another guy after that. The whole experience was just too nerve-wracking, and I probably hurt the guy, too, or at least disappointed him. I didn't want anybody to suffer.

In the months following that failed relationship, I felt even more lonely and empty than before. I decided that I had to find a girlfriend. That I deserved to love and be loved. In January 2002, I posted a personal ad online, but I chose a foreign dating site to do it. I didn't want to use any local site and be exposed. I was teaching over two hundred students every semester: young people who were probably very familiar with all the local dating sites. If anybody at the university found out that I was gay, the news would spread immediately. I would be laughed at, humiliated, and would probably lose my job.

I got a few responses from women in different countries, from Europe and the U.S. But the only one I liked was a girl named Ana. She was from New York. We exchanged emails for a few months. Then we started talking on the phone, hours and hours of conversations. She was so smart, and funny, and easy to talk to. She was perfect, and I felt like she was the closest person to me in the whole world. She liked me very much, too. On the phone, I didn't always understand her, and she didn't always understand me, but we learned to adapt.

In May, she came to Russia to meet me in person. We met in Moscow. In person, she was even better than I imagined her to be. She was very pretty, with olive skin, long wavy brown hair, and the most beautiful smile I'd ever seen. When we first met I had no idea what to say to her. I was really shy, and broke, too. So for the days we were in Moscow I'd cook us little meals in the hotel, with food that I brought with me, on a little stove there in the room.

Ana is originally from Peru, and she moved to the U.S. a few years before she met me. She was such a lively person; she talked a lot and always made me laugh. She worked for a TV station in New York, and she brought me lots of videos, CDs with American and Latin music, souvenirs from her country, and pictures of her family and places she'd traveled. It was so easy to be with her. I had never felt happier in my life. We spent three amazing days in Moscow and then took a train to my hometown, Saratov.

My parents questioned me about this girl who came to visit, about what her intentions were, and I had to tell them that Ana was my pen pal, just a friend who wanted to see Russia. I felt really bad that we had to hide, that I wasn't able to talk to my parents honestly about the most important person in my life. But I also didn't want the trip to end in a scandal. My parents finally agreed for Ana to stay at our house, under the condition that she slept not in my room but in the living room on the couch.

The ten days we spent together in Russia were the best days of my life, and by the time Ana had to leave I knew I was really in love with her. She loved me too, and the fact that she had to return to the U.S. was heartbreaking. We didn't know when we'd be able to see each other again. At that time I obviously couldn't apply for a fiancée visa like my sister did when she moved to the U.S. to marry her boyfriend. We wanted to try a tourist or a student visa, but then my situation changed. I heard back from a U.S. exchange program that I'd applied to months before, and I was accepted. I was scheduled to leave for the U.S. in summer 2002. The program wouldn't bring me to Ana; all of us participants had to go live in Lincoln, Nebraska. But it would bring me close to her, and at the time it seemed like a great opportunity for me to learn about the U.S. economy and help my academic work. In Nebraska, Ana and I stayed in touch the whole time. Our phone bills were huge. I managed to come to New York for Thanksgiving break and meet Ana there, see where she lived. It was the most beautiful city in the world. And, most importantly, Ana lived there.

The program ended in six months, and it was time to go back to Russia. Instead, I traveled to New York to be with Ana. It was hard leaving Russia behind. My parents were furious that I wasn't coming back, and I was burning all bridges. I had a career in Russia, a nice apartment, friends, family. I sacrificed all that to be with Ana. My parents were the hardest part: I loved them very much, and it broke my heart not to be able to see them.

I didn't have a choice, though. Even if Ana could come to live with me in Russia, we would never be able to be open there. Life in the U.S. might not always be easy, but at least here I never had a fear

of being humiliated and punished for being a lesbian.

Even all these years later, my parents can't deal with it. They know I live with Ana, but they don't want to know about her. Every time I talk to them they tell me I've ruined my life. They ask me how I can live without papers in the U.S., when in Russia I could have a good job, close to my family. Now I'm an outcast; they guilt-trip me every time we talk, they always tell me I've made a mistake, that I've ruined my life. My mom has visited a few times. She stayed with us, and the funny thing is, she actually gets along with Ana.

Ana and I always wanted to get married. I proposed to her on May 18, 2003, on the one-year anniversary of our meeting in Moscow. I was still broke at the time, but I somehow managed to save enough money to buy her a gold ring with a heart covered with tiny diamonds (really tiny, but pretty). She said yes. But we couldn't get married back then; same-sex marriages weren't legal in New York. Regardless, Ana was my partner, and we've been living together ever since. In our hearts, we considered ourselves married and committed to each other, even if we had to wait to do it officially.

Ana and I also always wanted to have children, and we considered various options that would allow us to have a child, including adoption. But when our friend, a gay man, suggested we have a child together, we really liked that idea. Our daughter, Elena, was born in June 2009. Ana and I are raising her, and Elena's father comes to visit about twice a month, and plays with Elena for a few hours. He's happy to have a biological child, and also happy not to have the responsibility of caring for a kid full-time. He works long hours and goes on lots of business trips; he wouldn't be able to take care of a child himself anyway.

Elena changed our lives a lot. Raising a kid is sleepless nights, added expenses, and no free time. But I'm really proud of my family. It might not fit the definition of "traditional," but it's a very happy one. My parents are happy I have a kid, too. I was 29 before I had her, so they were worried I was going to become an "old" childless woman. I send them pictures every day of Elena. My mom bought a new computer so we talk on Skype a lot, too. It's funny, sometimes I send them photos of the three of us, but I never told my parents Ana and I got married. It was sad that I couldn't tell them, but I don't think they could ever accept it. So if I don't have to tell them, why cause them the headache? Anyway, I accomplished the mission. I have a daughter I love, and my parents have a grandchild.

We decided not to get married until 2013, when DOMA was struck down by the Supreme Court, to get full legal recognition of our marriage. Now I can finally call Ana "my wife," and this makes me smile every time I think about it.

Ana's relatives have treated us really well. We moved to a new house this summer, and they came to see our new place. Ana's little nieces and nephew were playing with Elena in the backyard. Our new neighbor, a twelve-year-old girl, came up to talk to them and asked if they were visiting and how they got to know Elena. Ana's niece, an eight-year-old, proudly said, "Elena is our cousin." The neighbor girl asked how they could be cousins if Elena didn't look anything like them. Ana's family is Hispanic, all of them have dark hair and darker skin, while Elena has my very fair skin and blonde hair. Ana's niece thought about it for a second, and then said, just as confidently as before, "She might look different, but she's still part of our family." When I heard that, I wanted to cry.

ALEXANDER SMIRNOV
"I regret nothing."

This interview with Alexander Smirnov was originally published in the Russian weekly Afisha *in the spring of 2013. As soon as the issue came out, Alexander brought it to his boss, the press secretary for Marat Khusnullin, deputy mayor of Moscow. A few days later, Alexander's boss called him in for a conversation. She said that the deputy mayor, a Muslim, wouldn't understand, and that if Alexander didn't resign, their whole team would be fired, including her, a single mother.*

Alexander was offered four months' pay for his silence about being fired. He took the money (cash, in an envelope) and wrote a resignation letter effective the following day. Two months later, he found himself in the back of a police transport van for the first time. He had participated in a sanctioned LGBT protest and was beaten up and detained. Four months after that, when Vladimir Putin announced there is no discrimination against homosexuals in Russia, Alexander gave another interview where he told the story of how he was fired. "I'm still not convinced that I did the right thing," he says, "I should have probably returned the money after doing the second interview." But since his resignation, he hasn't been able to find work with a comparable salary, possibly because he has reluctantly become a gay rights activist.

This year he turns 40, but he is still afraid to come out in church, during confession. He has little hope of finding a new job, and not very much faith in becoming a successful activist, especially since the police refused to open an investigation into his assault at the protest. "I regret nothing," said Alexander, insisting we quote him on that.

I work in Moscow city government and I'm fully aware that after this interview is published, I may be fired. They don't need a scandal on the eve of the mayoral election, so they will probably ask me to quietly submit a resignation letter, try to portray me as unprofessional, or worse, cut all ties with me. I haven't told anyone that I'm gay. If someone at work makes some joke about fags, I just grin like an idiot. In my regular life, I have to control my gaze so that it doesn't linger over some beautiful man for a suspiciously long time. I've trained myself in self-control since childhood, but this causes constant internal pressure. I lead a double life, and it has me climbing the walls.

I grew up in a small town in the Far East and realized that something was awry when I was around 13 or 14, when everyone became interested in girls and I didn't. I wanted to get close to boys.

There was nothing outwardly sexual about my desires. I didn't understand what was happening to me. The hardest was between the ages of 14 and 16, when your hormones are raging and you're losing your mind from such strong desire that you couldn't even express it. This internal conflict, the conflict between you and society, tears you apart. There was no one around I could talk to. That was when I first started considering suicide. When, twenty years later, I started volunteering for an LGBT hotline, I found out that gay teens are four times more likely to commit suicide than their heterosexual peers.

I was almost 20 when I first saw *Ya + Ya* ["I + I," a mimeographed gay magazine published in Moscow in the early 1990s] magazine at a kiosk. There was an advertisement for a gay hotel on the cover. I could tell that it was for people like me. I just froze in front of the kiosk, deeply conflicted: I was afraid that the lady would immediately figure out why I was buying that magazine. I ended up having to buy a pack of pens to cover it up.

I found some ads that appealed to me in the magazine and I wrote to this guy who lived in Minsk. This was a different time, it was a paper letter. It's not like now where you message someone online and half an hour later you're in bed with them. The letter took two weeks to get there and then the response took two more weeks to get to me. It could get stuck somewhere along the way. I desperately awaited the response and spent a lot of time worrying. We corresponded for a year and finally Volodya came to see me. I was 20 and nine months. He was a year older.

This was the first time I'd ever been in love. He was pretty experienced. On the fourth day of his visit, he decided to count how many partners he'd been with, which he couldn't do without the assistance of a spelling dictionary with a list of men's names. It turned out that I was number seventy-seven in the course of his twenty-two years of life. This didn't stop me because I really loved him.

Our relationship was doomed from the start. We were very different in terms of our experience, opinions, and goals. He was, after all, a citizen of the capital, the capital of Belarus. He tried to expand our social circle and figure out where the other gay people hung out. We combed the town but never found it. I bought him a return ticket to Minsk. "Go home," I told him. "I can't watch you suffer here." Six months later I went to see him, and then I left, and then I went back again. This went on for another three or four years. It took another three or four years to get over him. I never cheated on him. Now, in hindsight, I think that perhaps I should have. I'm not positive that it's great to be faithful in this kind of a situation. I don't know. In any case, at the time I felt like it was the right thing to do.

I come from a regular Soviet family. My father was a heavy

drinker. He'd beat me and my mother. I want to say this, so that no reader will make the leap that abusive fathers necessarily lead to gay sons. He beat my brother, too, and he's straight. So that's not the reason. But there's no question that my life at home was no picnic. When he came to be with me, my boyfriend and I rented a separate apartment. I applied to college in Vladivostok just to get out.

In the dorms, I met Lena, who I later ended up "playing house" with. Lena was older and worked for the best regional paper. She really wanted to get me to switch over from my work in television. Instead, I was drafted. I tried hard to get some form of alternative military service. I told them that I was a pacifist and that my rights were protected by the constitution. At the enlistment office, they said that the constitution was one thing, but there wasn't a corresponding federal law, so I would have to choose between the army and prison. I chose prison. I would have been there for a long time if it hadn't been for Lena. When she found out I was in prison, she got me out with the right phone calls. She really was an awesome journalist.

After that, Lena confessed that she was in love with me. I was forced to tell her the truth. She was, I think, the first person I ever came out to. I'm a strong person, but she is even stronger, so this didn't stop her. She suggested we do an experiment.

Lena is four-and-a-half years older than me. She's not beautiful, but she is incredibly charming, and very professional. I really value that in a person. She's a real talent. But she also likes to take risks, and I mean this in a negative way, because the risks she takes often lead to disaster. At least in my experience, that's what happened.

Lena divorced her husband with whom she had a one-and-a-half-year-old child. We took Lena's sister, who was in ninth grade, and moved to Volgodonsk to start over. For a year, as I've already mentioned, we "played house." This was a very hard time. I was in a bind: she was a person I owed a lot to. On the other hand, I felt guilty because I couldn't return Lena's feelings. On top of it all, she drank, which had started before we even met. She got pregnant. With twins. They were mine. And we—I can't even say that it was "we," she was the one who made the decision—she decided she needed to get an abortion. The tests showed that she had kidney problems. This was during the 1998 financial crisis. We were these fucking awesome professionals and now we found ourselves penniless with her kid and younger sister. We worked, but they didn't pay us. By that time, we'd tortured each other so much. We just couldn't be together anymore.

I consider all of this my sin. When I was baptized a year later (even though I'm gay, I believe in God), I repented having allowed Lena to make a very hard decision on her own and get an abortion. Sometimes I think about how old my children would have been. Since

then, a few women have asked me to father their children, and I want to, but it has never worked out. It's a sad story.

I don't remember how soon after the abortion Lena and I stopped sleeping together. It probably doesn't matter. What matters is that for me, having sex with her was always like rape. I'm in good health: I could probably be aroused by a lamppost if I wanted to be. That's just a matter of using your imagination. Nonetheless, having sex with a woman felt unnatural. Just because a man is aroused doesn't mean he wants intimacy. Physiology and emotions are separate things. At a certain point, we decided that we would keep living together but stop pretending to be a couple. We got a new job and told people we were brother and sister. We stopped being friends because, as it turns out, certain deeds can kill a friendship.

After that I got into a relationship with a man, and we even exchanged rings, but then he went to China and never came back.

In 2003, we moved to Moscow. It's a lot easier to be who I am in the capital. A year after I got to Moscow, I wrote to my mother. I really wanted to fix our relationship because when I was a kid, I had really faulted her for not divorcing my dad. I addressed all the gay stereotypes I could think of. I wrote that I'd felt the urge since I was a teen, that no one had "turned" me, that I hadn't fallen in love with a girl who'd broken my heart, that you can't cure it, that there haven't been trustworthy studies determining the causes. With flawless logic, I gave her an exhaustive account. I sent the letter through the mail. Four weeks went by, but there was no reply. I called my grandmother and it turned out she didn't know about the letter. My mother called me back five minutes later. She said that she hadn't known what to say, but that she loved me. We both cried. Since then, we've been close. It's a great joy to be accepted for who you are.

Two years ago, I lost a friend. He was found in his apartment stabbed to death. He was gay. Do you know how things like this happen? Gay men often meet each other online. There are gangs of people who come to gay men's houses disguised as gay men, rob them, and then kill them. And the relatives don't tell anyone because no one wants these stories circulating about them. That friend and I had a female friend in common, Sasha. She told me to be careful and stop meeting men online. I ignored her advice.

He was very good looking, and his profile on the website was pretty interesting. He came over to my house, we hung out, and then slept together. On his way out, he asked me to borrow some movies, promising to return them in a few days. He came back a week later. I let him in and went to the kitchen, where I was cooking something. Meanwhile, he let another guy in. They came up from behind me and hit me over the head with a bottle, but I didn't fall over or pass out. I

turned around and instantly understood that I might be facing death. One of them was holding a knife and the broken bottle, which he immediately shoved up against my throat, and the other one was also holding a knife. The first one was screaming that his brother was a faggot and that people like me were responsible for this, which is why I should be killed.

It's unclear why it was my fault that someone else was gay. I tried to explain that, but it quickly became clear that there was no talking them out of it. So I just asked them not to kill me. I was bleeding hard and I thought that I was going to pass out. I begged them not to kill me. You can't imagine how ashamed I am of myself, although they are the ones who broke into my house and almost killed me. They took everything, even my phone. They committed the crime and I'm the one who's ashamed.

I was shivering, but I couldn't call an ambulance. I would have had to explain what happened. I couldn't tell anyone at work. I convinced my friends to call my coworkers and tell them that I had been attacked at a bus stop. I couldn't go to the police, either. It would have been easy enough to find my attackers, but I didn't have the strength to explain myself to the men in uniform. Now, I blame myself for my weakness. Those two really could kill someone if no one stops them.

When I was 13, my life was hard because I was alone. Now I'm 39, and society is still trying to put me in my place. I really hate being told how to live my life. I hate being accused of things I haven't done. I hate being torn away from those dear to me. I can't tolerate being persecuted.

I can stand up and say that this ends here.

—As told to Kseniya Leonova

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RUSLAN SAVOLAYNEN
"I've become embarrassed to tell people that I'm gay."

With his flawless five-o'clock shadow, an intricate haircut and perm, and perfect skin, 27-year-old Ruslan Savolaynen goes to a cosmetologist to smooth out even the hint of a wrinkle. His look is completed by a Catholic cross on a considerable gold chain, Italian shoes, and an immaculately pressed suit. All of this, combined with his delicate build, makes Ruslan look like he's from the Mediterranean rather than Russia. He would blend right into a crowd in Spain, where he is thinking of moving. However, just a few years ago he felt like he fit in perfectly well not only in Russia but also in Nashi, the Kremlin's official youth movement.

My father is Palestinian and my mother is a Russian Finn. I spent a lot of my childhood in Jordan, where my father's family lived. When I was ten, his grandmother came from Saudi Arabia. She was the matriarch of a large clan, and she decided that she was going to take me in and raise me. That very night, my mother and I packed our things and went back to Russia. I haven't seen my father since. Before we moved, I didn't even know the word gay. In Russia, I saw *The Next Best Thing* with Madonna on TV3 and understood that all sorts of things were possible.

My peers in Russia didn't like me much. I was always smaller than everyone. Until tenth grade, I just couldn't fit in; I only had one friend. These kids from the neighboring school once pushed me under a moving car. I got off with a broken leg. I've dealt with a lot of violence that's given me serious health problems. After one such attack, my vision got catastrophically bad. I've ended up in the hospital multiple times; I've had six concussions. The last time it was at the XXXX Club off Zvenigorodskaya. My friends and I, one of whom was a woman, were beaten up really badly.

I had my first romantic experience in eleventh grade. I was in Nashi and we would go to Moscow for various events on a regular basis. Being a member of Nashi had a major effect on me since it put me in a new milieu where nobody knew me. I could open up and show who I was. I made friends and started acting differently. On one of our trips to Moscow, everyone went to the countryside while I ran off and went to Three Monkeys [a gay club], although I was afraid, because I'd never been to a club before. At a certain point I realize that I've been sitting at a little table with a young man and we've been

talking about life for two hours. When it was almost morning, we went outside. He walked me to the station, and that was the first time I'd ever felt this feeling that I'd never felt before. The kids from the group were upset at me for ditching them. I cried a lot when I got back to St. Petersburg and I got a job so I could travel to Moscow. After that, I went to see him every week. He introduced me to his mother, which was shocking to me. Everything was fine until one day, he disappeared. He turned up again six months later, but now he was a completely different person.

I was in Nashi for three years, up until my sophomore year of college. There were different factions, a lot of opportunities for social activism, on top of demonstrations against one thing or another. I was responsible for organizing these events: rounding up members, holding promotional events at schools. Everyone knew about me. That's what I had decided in eleventh grade: that from then on, I'd have a new life where I wouldn't hide anything from anyone. For the most part, people were OK with it. There were those who weren't, but, as a rule, they were always outnumbered. In the summer we would go to Lake Seliger, where they take tens of thousands of kids from all around Russia. I had long hair, I wore little shirts. You could spot me from a mile away. It so happened that I was the only visibly out gay man in a crowd of several thousand kids. Some people would even come to gawk at me.

There were tough guys who'd sidle up to me to try to change my mind, telling me I was wrong to live the way I did. But the kids I knew would chase them away. Yakemenko [Vasily Yakemenko, the leader of Nashi] once said something along the lines of what Putin has said, that he wasn't against homosexuality but that the birth rate was dropping in our country. (I saw Putin and Medvedev, too, and shook their hands.) So there weren't any really bad incidents there. I wasn't the only gay kid, but the other ones were in deep hiding. The last time I went to Seliger, there were two boys there who were a couple and openly living together. A small community formed among the lesbians and one of my classmates even came out there.

I have two older brothers and it's like we're from different worlds. For them all of this is bizarre and disgusting. Whenever they're drunk, they start in on me, "Faggot! How could you!" It's never gotten physical. They find ways to overcome their feelings. My mother is fine with it. I don't know why. She even went to Central Station, the gay club, for her birthday once. She really empathizes with transsexuals. Whenever she sees them on TV, she's on the verge of tears.

I had tried to hide my sexual orientation. There was a time when I did drag performances at clubs. Naturally, I kept my wardrobe in my closet. When my mother asked me about the costumes, I tried to tell

her they belonged to my stripper friend who was keeping them here because she couldn't keep them at home. She saw through me, of course.

On Sundays I go to the Catholic Church. I became a Catholic four years ago, after I left Nashi. A guy took me to the church and it made things easier for me. I met people who are a lot less judgmental about everything. Pastors openly tell me that they don't believe in what I do, and they try to re-educate me, but when they see that it's pointless, they accept me as I am. There are a lot of gay people in the Catholic Church. Although they take a pretty hard line stand against it, a lot of gay people go there. Some go because they are trying to fight their homosexuality. The guy who took me there is trying to root it out of himself. He's gone into the seminary to become a priest. There are a lot people like him. For them, Catholicism is a weapon against being gay. For me, it was a place where I found understanding, shelter, and peace. Several weeks ago, I even became the godfather to a friend's daughter.

I've noticed that over the past six months, I've become embarrassed to tell people I'm gay, even though I haven't hidden it since high school. I decided that if people from the LGBT community didn't hide, it would change perceptions of homosexuality. If you put yourself in the position of the humiliated and insulted, other people will use this against you. But there is progress. If not for this situation, we wouldn't be having these conversations and everything would be just as it was. Thank you, Duma deputies. You provided a good impetus for public discourse.

—As told to Dmitry Simanovsky

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LENA & NASTYA
"My parents said, 'We're just going to make her disappear.'"

The fact that Nastya and Lena, 24 and 22 respectively, are accomplished corporate lawyers is perhaps the least surprising part of their story. They met eight years ago in Kirov, a city an overnight train ride from Moscow, and since that night they've gone through every sort of hell to stay together.

LENA

It's all rather prosaic: we met on the Internet. My best friend had transferred to the school where Nastya went, and I started hanging out on their online forum.

NASTYA

You wrote that you needed some songs by Psichea.

LENA

You're embarrassing me.

NASTYA

It's this awful band, you know, "aaaaaaaaaaaaaaah-boom-boom-boom-boom," but I just happened to have an entire disk of theirs that a classmate had given me. I wrote: "Come to our school and I'll give it you." That's how we met. Lena was 14 and I was 16. I was in eleventh grade and she was in the ninth.

I realized I was gay when I was about 13. It was an uneventful discovery. I said, "Well, all right," and proceeded to live with this knowledge. I didn't tell anyone, of course. Lena was the first person I told. But at first, we just hung out and talked on the phone a lot.

LENA

And then Nastya hinted that she had another girlfriend.

NASTYA

It was just this girl I was also hanging out with. It's not like we had a relationship. But I found out she was in love with me back then. But Lena was intrigued and we started talking even more. It was tricky: I had my own phone line that my parents had put in for me, so I was free to spend as much time on the phone as I wanted, but Lena's father didn't allow her to talk for hours. So we had to correspond. But her father kept deleting ICQ [an instant messenger program] as well, so we would meet up in these awful online chat rooms to talk, even though we lived in the same city. So we were on one of those chats when I asked Lena if she thought she might be able to have a relationship with me. It took me a long time to get an answer out of

her, but when I finally got to “yes,” I was terrified. I’d never had a relationship with a girl before, even though I knew that was what I wanted. Plus, I worried that I was older and may have pressured her. So I retreated. But we kept talking.

In May, about five months after we first met, we went for a walk in the botanical gardens. There’s this little river there with a bridge over it. And there we are standing on this little bridge and Lena says, “Kiss me.” I said, “I can’t, you have to understand blah blah blah.” And she’s like: “That’s it. In that case, I’m leaving and not coming back.”

LENA

I just said “That’s it” and walked away. I was walking and thinking: this is it. If she doesn’t come after me now, I’m not even going to talk to her.

NASTYA

I was terrified, both of having to kiss her and of the possibility that she’d walk away and never come back. So I ran after her and we went back to the bridge, which was sort of secluded, and I kissed her.

LENA

And then these two women sitting on the hill above us—

NASTYA

They start hollering: “What’s going on, would you look at that!” So we had to beat a retreat. And that’s how our relationship started.

LENA

Then Nastya went to university in Moscow and I stayed back to finish high school. Nastya had this five-term system at university with a week in between terms, so she would come home. And I kept going to preparatory courses and such in Moscow, so we saw each other about once a month. Two years later I got into the same university, also in the legal department.

NASTYA

I was living in an apartment my parents had bought for me in Moscow, though it wasn’t legally in my name, and when Lena came, we started living there together.

LENA

I started out living in the dorms but kept shuttling back and forth between the dorm and the apartment, and this was hard, especially because the dorm was in a suburb. So I told my father I didn’t want to live in the dorm anymore and rented a room and moved most of my things there: at least it was in the city. But in the end, I still lived at Nastya’s. And when her parents visited, I went to my rented room. That was really nerve-wracking.

NASTYA

Toward the end of our first year living like that—Lena was

finishing her first year and I my third year at the university—I went home to Kirov. And I forgot my cell phone at my parents' house and took the train back to Moscow.

LENA

I kept calling and texting her. The thing is, we had had a fight-nothing serious, not a big deal, but at first I thought Nastya wasn't answering because she was upset with me. So I kept texting, angrily at first—"Fine, go ahead and pout"—and then conciliatory: "I'm sorry. Let's make up already." Then I started panicking: "Where are you?"

NASTYA

At this point my parents were busy exploring the contents of my phone.

LENA

Three years' worth of text messages and photos.

NASTYA

So I got to Moscow and at the end of the day got on the train back to Kirov: my parents had summoned me back for a talk. Our friends came over to see me off. We had these two friends who brought vodka and drank it, I think, for the first time in their lives that day, because everyone was so upset.

My parents told me to end it. I said, I can't, I don't want to, I love her, we've been together for a long time. They said, in that case we're going to have to do something about her. My parents are very wealthy people. And they said, "We're just going to make her disappear." I got really scared. I texted Lena, "Let's break up." Instead of responding by saying "OK," Lena got on a train and came to Kirov.

LENA

I stood under her windows until she came out and we talked. I was in tears, slobbering.

NASTYA

I promised Lena we wouldn't break up, and I promised my parents we'd break up and everyone was happy and I was miserable.

LENA

When we got back to Moscow, we tried living separately because we were afraid Nastya's parents might surprise us with an inspection. But soon we were living together again. That was really the most difficult time. Because, say, Nastya would have an earlier class than I and she would leave the house and then I'd go to the window and see a black SUV outside—I think all large cars look like Nastya's father's car—and I'd see it parking and then I'd quickly grab my things and go up a floor and change out of my pajamas and into my school clothes standing up on the landing. And then I'd call Nastya in hysterics and she'd say, "It's probably not my father" and I'd say, "But I hear someone coming up the stairs." And then I'd be too scared to go back

into the apartment.

NASTYA

In the summer, my best friend was getting married. I went to Kirov for the wedding. Lena was in Abkhazia on vacation with her mother. And I forgot to log out of Vk.com [a Russian social network] on the computer. That's when my parents cornered me again. I admitted that Lena and I were still in touch. For some reason my parents decided I should have labor therapy and sent me to work in my father's factory. I guess they thought if I spent two weeks wearing coveralls and sorting timber, I'd become less dykey and more feminine and start liking men. They also took my phone away.

LENA

That's when I realized I was in real trouble, that Nastya's parents would talk to my parents. My father is a military man and a real homophobe. He thought Nastya and I were just friends. We could be watching television one day and there would be a mention of gays and he'd say, "They all belong in the gas chamber." And we'd just sit there quietly.

I decided to preemptively come out to my mother. I had this mythical boyfriend named Lyosha, who never existed; I would just tell my mother everything that was going on with Nastya except I'd call her Lyosha. My mother was perfectly satisfied with Lyosha, but not once he turned into Nastya. But she didn't throw a fit or anything. But the day before our vacation was supposed to end, my mother got a call from my father, who said he now knew everything and told her to send me home. So I was on the train for three days stressing out.

He picked me up at the station. His eyes were red and his hands were shaking. He said, "Either we forget this ever happened and then I continue to support you, or you are no longer my daughter." I said, "I have to think about it." He was shocked. He was sure I'd accede immediately. He and I had a very good relationship, and I lived with him, not with my mother, after the divorce.

NASTYA

Two days later it's the bachelorette party. I went and got a manicure and pedicure and am sitting at home, wearing pink pajamas, my toenails are bright red, and I have on high-heeled shoes because they were too tight, so I'd sprayed them with some compound and put them on to stretch them out before the party. And I'm sipping coffee from a demitasse cup.

And then my parents barge in. Both have bloodshot eyes and both are screaming. "We were at Lena's father's house and he said you are the man. You're the man in the relationship!" I say, "Look at me! Do I look like a man?" And they just keep screaming. Then my mother started telling me Lena was a whore and saying all sorts of things

about her. I said, “You know, this is the person I love. After you talk about her like this, I don’t even want you to be my mother.” That’s when my father started hitting me. He didn’t stop until after he’d split my lip. There was blood everywhere.

I went to wash up and saw myself in the mirror: half my face is blue and my lip is badly torn. I came back downstairs and said, “Dear parents, we have to get my things together now and take me to the hospital. I need stitches.” My father looked at me and said, “Nah, it will heal on its own.” In the end I needed six stitches. So I said, “OK, then I’m going on my own.” I started packing—they wouldn’t let me take a lot of my things. I left with a small suitcase of summer clothes; they wouldn’t even let me take my laptop.

My best friend’s fiancée came to pick me up and took me to the hospital. Lena came, and they stitched me up.

LENA

Her entire face was blue. I had never seen anything like it. She went to her best friend’s brother’s apartment, which happened to be empty. The next morning, as soon as my father went to work, I got my bag and slipped out of the house. I’d made my choice. Our parents started looking for us. We shut our phones off.

NASTYA

My father got the idea that Ksyusha, my best friend, must be hiding me. He went to see her father.

LENA

Ksyusha’s father is the same sort of bigwig as Nastya’s.

NASTYA

Ksyusha told her father that if he’d seen my face, he’d be on my side too. And that if he surrendered me to my father then she’d cancel her wedding. He agreed. So we stayed there a few more days and then we went to Moscow.

LENA

Not so simple. We had tickets to go to Moscow. But two hours before the train leaves, Ksyusha’s father calls: “You have to exchange your tickets because Nastya’s father has put a tracker on your names and now he’s bought tickets to go on the same train,” which Ksyusha’s father knows because he’s put a tracker on him. So we got tickets on a later train. While we were at the station exchanging tickets, my father was there looking for us, but we saw him and hid. Once we were on the train, I got paranoid. I said, “Your father is in Moscow and he’s probably tracked these tickets too by now, so he’ll be waiting for us at the station.” So we got off in Vladimir [about one hundred miles outside Moscow] and took a commuter train the rest of the way—and then only as far as a suburb of Moscow.

Our old apartment was inaccessible: Nastya’s father had changed

the locks. We went to the apartment where I was renting a room for my things. The place was a dump. And my "room" was actually a bed in a tiny room where another girl lived. We stayed there for a couple of months, until we were able to rent an apartment.

NASTYA

My parents summoned me to my old apartment for my birthday and offered to buy me the car of my choice if I would only leave Lena. I said no, so I didn't get a car, but at least that time they let me take a few of my things. My father had broken or thrown out most of them.

LENA

Then they arranged for the four of us to meet. They said they wanted to send Nastya to Sicily for a year on the condition that we don't talk or correspond. And if our love survives the year…

NASTYA

My mother didn't say "love." What they have is *love*. We have something else.

LENA

Anyway, we were willing to go along with it. But then I said to Nastya, "Nothing is going to change even if we do this. They'll start all over again once the year ends and they'll never leave us in peace."

NASTYA

They changed their minds anyway. Then they harassed me for two years, then my father attacked me again at my cousin's wedding. I guess because it reminded him that I'm not having a wedding. Then we spent two years not talking to one another, and now we're on speaking terms again—only because they think Lena and I broke up.

LENA

Because we did, for a month. That was six months ago. Then we got back together but we forgot to tell them. Because Nastya really doesn't have any communication with her parents.

NASTYA

Every time I see them, it ends in a confrontation.

LENA

Ksyusha and I keep telling her to give it up, to stop trying. But she says, "But they are my parents."

NASTYA

I want them to see that I'm an honest, open person, always willing to have contact.

LENA

But they see something completely different. You're honest with them and they think you're lying; they don't believe you could have known you were gay when you were 13. The thing is, we'd planned to tell our parents, but only once we had jobs. We were pretty sure they wouldn't let us live in that apartment anymore once they found out.

But we didn't expect to end up on our own with Nastya having only a bag of summer clothes. Those were really hard times. We had dry pasta and we stole mayonnaise and ketchup from the other people in the apartment.

NASTYA

Lena would make me a sandwich to take to work: two slices of bread and a single slice of cheese that had already started drying up. I expend a lot of energy and need a lot of calories, so I'd eat that sandwich as soon as I left the house and then at work I'd pinch sweets from everyone. Every so often we'd let ourselves get a shawarma sandwich or a grilled chicken from a street vendor, and that was like going out to a luxury restaurant. This went on for a about a year. I had a job in a call center and Lena was waiting tables. But she has low blood pressure and the job exhausted her so much she got sick.

LENA

Then I got work as an editor. I could work from home, so this didn't get in the way of my studies. That lasted a year. And then I restored my relationship with my father and he said, "Quit your job." That was the toughest year at the university, when you take your boards—half the people drop out at that point—and my father said he'd help me out during that year. After that, I got a job in my field.

NASTYA

And I got a good job right out of university in 2011 and we were finally able to get on our feet.

LENA

If we didn't both specialize in Russian law, we'd probably have left the country by now.

NASTYA

It would be easier if we were engineers or something else that's universal. As it is, we both need to get a new education in order to live abroad. That's a hard decision to make; the memory of our last period of "going without" is still very recent. We've only just barely begun to accumulate a little bit of fat. And to be honest, I've never encountered any homophobia, except from my parents. And the case in which I represented a woman whose parents were trying to take her son away [see MARINA & ELENA: *"And then they kidnapped my son for the first time,"* p. 19]. But that was not a case of homophobia directed against me personally. At my last job, everyone knew and there was no problem. At my current job, I don't really socialize with anyone.

LENA

I've only made one friend at my job, and I've told her. And her husband knows too.

NASTYA

As for the laws, in this country everyone's rights are

systematically violated. And I don't feel hurt and limited by the anti-gay laws specifically, because all the laws they're passing infringe on the rights of all citizens of the Russian Federation. And that does make us want to leave this sad country. Rather, this sad state.

But the state politics have given my parents a second wind. My mother called and said, "They're going to start sending your kind to jail soon. You're going to end up in jail." I said, "Oh, goody, no one but women around." She screamed and hung up. That's how I communicate with my parents now. My father said, "Go try doing it with a man. What if you like it?" I said, "How about you go first? If you like it, I'll try it too."

—As told to Masha Gessen

VITALY MATVEEV
"In general, the way someone reacts to your coming out is a good filter."

Scientist and photographer Vitaly Matveev, 35, returned to Moscow after many years of studying and working in Japan, Britain, and America. He's not a gay activist or a revolutionary. But, as it turns out, living openly, as he grew accustomed to doing during his years abroad, is itself a form of activism—a battle with prejudice.

I'll never forget it. I was 6. My mother and I went to the movies to see *The Amphibian Man*. In the middle of the movie, my mother bends down to me and whispers: "Look at how beautiful Guttiere [the female protagonist] is!" I nodded weakly, while not taking my eyes off Ichtiandr [the male protagonist]. I fell in love with him and asked to be taken to this movie a number of times. This goes to the question of why the very idea of "gay propaganda" is absurd. As a biologist, I know that sexual orientation is formed in the womb and is impossible to influence in any direction. It's not a matter of choice. When I was a child, I didn't know any of this, of course, and didn't understand why I was attracted to the beautiful Ichtiandr.

In high school and college I dated girls. I didn't lose my virginity to a man until I was 24, when I decided that I couldn't lie to myself any longer and there was no point in resisting. This was in Thailand, where I was vacationing before going on a scientific expedition to Cambodia. It was with a man I met at the beach. I travel a lot. I've been to more than thirty countries and lived in three for an extended period. I haven't paid particular attention to the significance of being openly gay in any of them.

In England, I worked so much I barely had time for a personal life. I lived in Japan for three years and had a boyfriend there. Japanese culture is infinitely tolerant; it's not controversial being gay there. Our friends didn't know about us for another reason: discussing your private life is very taboo in Japan. We had a group of friends, we all worked together, traveled, and hung out. I didn't find out that some of the people in this group were dating until after I left, when they sent me their wedding photos. Before their weddings, they didn't even show affection at parties. It wasn't the custom.

America was the funniest. A Russian colleague got there before me. We'd been friends since childhood. She tried to woo me when we were in high school, and when it didn't work, she decided I was gay.

Many years later, in the States, having discovered I was going to the university where she was, she spread a rumor about my sexual orientation. I didn't understand why everyone was so polite to me and so insistent on their level of tolerance.

In Russia, it was hard. I ended up having a real scene with my parents. My father, despite being deeply religious, was calmer about it than my mother. She was truly horrified, and, it seems, still hasn't come to terms with it. Still, the very next day she told me she loved me, and that's the most important thing. In general, the way someone reacts to you coming out is a good filter. You get rid of unnecessary ties; all of my real friends have passed this test.

In Russia, the problem isn't with being openly gay—it's the atmosphere. After I got back from Japan, I didn't recognize the Moscow I loved. The people, the feeling: it was all different. One morning a friend and I were walking from a gay club to the subway. It was light out, I was headed to work, and we walked past a group of teenagers, about ten of them, drinking beer. We heard a scream, "Hey, faggots!" and immediately I felt someone kick me in the back. I turned around and punched the person who'd attacked me, but then they all jumped on us at the same time, threw us on the ground, and started beating us up. They kicked us in the head, the ribs, all over. I did karate for four years, and in a moment of rage and pain, I jumped up, grabbed a bottle out of one of their hands, and threw myself at them. We were saved by a patrol car going by. The teenagers took off and we got in the squad car and ended up catching two or three of them and taking them down to the station.

This was the only unpleasant incident I've ever gotten into because of my sexual orientation. It's not only dangerous to be gay here, but really, to be anyone. That's why a lot of my friends move out of the country or to different cities. Right now, I have an interesting job with a lot of responsibility. I really like it, but the question of emigrating is always open. With these norms and laws, I'm always considering it. Incidentally, they don't know my sexual orientation at work. I'm not worried about it; I am not going to hide from anyone.

Recently, there was a funny incident. I was on a yacht in the Adriatic in very severe, masculine company, these guys from St. Petersburg. We started talking about Mykonos, and the conversation turned toward how it's important to beat up fags. I couldn't help myself and explained everything about myself. They were like, well, you're one of us, you're fine, but the rest of them we need to beat up.

I don't think that a gay person's personal life in Moscow is different than anyone else's. It's the same eternal lack of time and energy to find the right person and develop a serious relationship. In the three years I've been in Moscow, I've had a few flings and just one

real relationship—again, with a foreigner. We met two years ago, on December 10, during the Bolotnaya Square protests. I remember how I'd packed my backpack in case I got arrested and that same evening I was showing it to my future boyfriend. We dated for more than six months in a number of countries and then we decided to move in together. We considered Moscow. His company has an office here, but he wasn't able to get transferred, and anyway, we decided that Austria would be better for a gay couple. Plus, it's easier for me as a scientist to find a job there than it is for him to find a job in Russia. We were discussing having kids. We even found a potential surrogate mother. And then everything ended suddenly, literally on the eve of my "trial move-in." It happens.

—As told to Karen Shainyan

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NATALIA USHAKOVA
"If I start worrying about the government, I'll end up having a third heart attack."

Natalia Ushakova raised six children with her partner, Olga. Today, the kids range from 14 to 24, and only the youngest live at home with their mothers. Natalia and Olga will be grandmothers soon, and Natalia is planning to create a crisis center where LGBT teens can receive help and shelter if they've been kicked out of their homes, or have otherwise found themselves in dangerous situations. Right now Natalia and Olga are giving shelter to two LGBT teens they helped get off the streets of Moscow.

For those who believe in reincarnation: my wife Olga and I were together in our previous life. Otherwise, we've been together for long enough to be two parts of one whole, a whole called a family.

We both grew up in Soviet times. Back then there wasn't only no lesbianism, there wasn't any sex at all. So we'd both gotten married, even though I'd always felt attracted to my female friends. The first time I had sex with a woman was in college. At first it seemed insane, but it was also insanely pleasant.

By the time we met, we had each had children, and some of them were already teens. All it took was a couple of hours together to see that we wanted to be together. That was seven years ago. We're in our eighth year living together.

It may sound strange, but both my and Olga's children were fine with our moving in together. We immediately found a common language.

Same-sex parents are no different than heterosexual parents if the father doesn't drink and push the mother around. I can hammer in a nail, chop wood, and lay wire myself. Like any family, we have our disagreements, but not because we're both women. The rest, the everyday, is the same: cleaning, doing the dishes, skipping class, and keeping grades up. The children do the dishes and clean. I cook. Olga goes to work. I also do the laundry and ironing. Everyone fixes things around the house. When I get sick, Olga cooks and the little ones do the washing and ironing. We're all equal.

There are practically no other families like ours in our city and Olga sometimes gets bored. That's when we go to Moscow to hang out at a club or go to a concert.

The "morality warriors" claim that the "propaganda" of growing

up in a same-sex family will make children homosexuals. Idiots! Our three eldest are all married. Two of our other children are dating. My son and his girlfriend also seem to be moving toward marriage. Only the youngest hasn't figured out his love life yet, but he's only fourteen. He is courting a girl very gracefully.

My mother used to make mean-spirited jokes about us, but after a while, she calmed down. My middle daughter Nastya has helped a lot in this regard—she's going to give us the gift of a grandson soon. She said that she's not going to disown me, even if I decided to live with the devil himself. If grandma doesn't like it, she won't come see her. That was her ultimatum.

Friends come over pretty often. They don't have any issues with us, or any kind of negativity toward us. I'm like one of the guys with them, and they aren't shy about telling me all of their secrets and problems. They even call me at night sometimes. I have a lot of straight friends and they are all worried about us.

I try not to pay attention to the news. If I start worrying about some nonsense with our government, I'm going to end up having a third heart attack. But I'm afraid of the hatred of the people who hate without knowing why. It's like it was during the Inquisition. There's mass hysteria, a witch hunt.

Some people leave the country so that they can have families and lead normal lives. To each his own. Everyone should do whatever they find necessary. But what should people do if they can't leave the country?

I am not about to run and hide. But if they come for my children, I will respond with the same violence they throw at me. In this case, violence must be answered with violence.

It used to be easier. Before this whole brouhaha, no one paid any attention and didn't even know the words to talk about it. But they could have put us in jail. There was an article in the criminal code, but they didn't use it on very many women. There were some, though. If two girls are dating and one is under eighteen, she gets three years, just like that, unnatural relations, for being a sex offender.

We are writing our own story. The people are the ones who made the revolution. I strongly believe that everything will change soon. It's important to come out of the underground, but we have a lot to lose.

The idea for a crisis center for LGBT teens came up spontaneously. Someone wrote me from another country to tell me that there were two LGBT teens living on the street in Moscow. It wasn't summer. So I went to go pick them up. And I'll help others out, too, if the need arises.

You can talk and offer a lot of things, but there are very few people who actually do anything. The teens need physical and

material support. More than anything they need people to take care of them. It's too early to talk about the objective of the project since we don't have the laws to make this possible. But the shelter needs to come together and fast. It's almost winter and many of our children are on the streets. These children are more vulnerable to rape and torture and they need help. They are the victims of circumstance and of our laws.

I'm working on this alone for now, but I do what I can. But why talk about it when you need to act? For today, I declare that it's my house and I can invite anyone I want to live there.

I'm not an organizer and not even an activist. I'm just the kind of person who can't look the other way. I also have a job. I've just taken a sabbatical for health reasons. Our family can't survive on one salary, and the kids we take in will need to eat, too. Some of them will need clothes, too. As a rule, they end up on the streets without a change of underwear or an extra pair of socks.

In general, you can't be indifferent to children, but these in particular are in need of our support. The adults they trusted since they were little have rejected them. This is more hurtful than anything their peers can do. If you have problems at school and on the street, but your mother is waiting for you at home, and she understands, all of the rest of it seems small.

This conversation took place during one of the "Evening Salons" hosted by "Children-404," an online community for gay Russian teens that formed in 2012. The conversation has been abridged, and is published here with permission from the community administrator.

MAX* & SASHA*
"Discussing my private life with a journalist seems insane."

Max, 33, is the co-owner of a restaurant. Sasha, 30, is a senior manager at a small international company. Several months after this conversation, Max had a daughter. He had wanted a child for a long time, and ended up having one with an old friend of his, a straight woman. Max sees his son several times a week. He sometimes stays overnight, and Max sees him every weekend. Over time, the whole big family has opened their arms to Max and his boyfriend as well.

SASHA

I don't remember being particularly tormented by my sexual orientation when I was growing up. In this sense, I had arrested development: I only became interested in sex when I was 17, and that was when I noticed that I was attracted to boys and not girls. I had sex for the first time then, but my first relationship didn't happen until I was 24. We fell in love very hard. It was even kind of unhealthy.

The only reason my parents don't know is that they've never asked whether I'm seeing anyone. They don't meddle in my personal affairs. The most important thing to them is that I'm not an alcoholic or a drug addict, and that I don't live at work. It's never come up at work either. I never had any kind of traumatic coming-out experience. I've told my close friends who need to know. I don't have many of those, and there was no drama there, either. I told them, they accepted it, and that was that. I remember when we were in college and four of us were renting a two-bedroom. Naturally, it was cramped, but none of my heterosexual roommates ever had a problem with my boyfriend coming over.

A few months after Max and I started dating, one of my close friends invited us to his wedding. It was a very grand, beautiful celebration: the end of the summer, white tents and tables outside. Everyone was invited with their significant others, boyfriends and girlfriends. I brought my boyfriend, too. Max and I went as a couple, and we didn't hide it, but it didn't cause even a hint of awkwardness. Both our friends and their parents were happy for us, no one looked at us funny, not even the older folks. Max danced with the mothers of the bride and the groom. Overall, it was a good party, one of the best I can remember.

Gay friends have told me stories about having bad experiences coming out to their families or at work, but nothing of the sort ever

happened to me. I think I have more problems from being tall than I do from being gay. I often hit my forehead on door jambs or can't fit on the bunk on the train. There are plenty of bigger issues in my life than how people treat me because of my sexual orientation. I'm more concerned about the larger meaning of what happens in life and in our society, which is not directly related to my sexual orientation. I'm not just upset by the anti-gay law, I'm upset by all of the laws they are passing. I worry about whether my work is meaningful. I don't just want to have a career, I want there to be some tangible benefit. I want my work to help people. I think about children. All of this is of greater concern to me than my sexual orientation.

MAX

Really, this is insulting. In principle, I am not against a public dialogue about homosexuality, or honest stories and brave confessions. Perhaps, for some people, it is actually important to say all of this publicly. I wouldn't argue with that for a second. However, for me personally, talking to a journalist about my private life seems insane. After all, I'm not some celebrity.

In my life, as in the life of any other person, there has been fear, insecurity, and pain. But perhaps the most insulting thing is what I am enduring right now: a journalist asking questions, not about social issues, business, or trends in international cuisine, and not even about the issue of gay marriage, but literally about my private life. What is it like for me to be gay and what kinds of things have happened to me because I am gay? This is insulting not only for me but also for the journalist. And this whole stupid situation was created by the idiots who passed the anti-gay laws.

When a few years ago they were banning gay pride parades in Moscow, my friend, a foreigner, asked me why I didn't support the gay activists. I told my friend that in our country gay people aren't the only ones denied their rights: there are also the disabled, orphans, retirees, women, all of them. In the West, gays have won the battle for marriage so they can visit ailing partners in the hospital. Here, I couldn't even get them to let me visit my own mother in the hospital. The only way I got in was by bribing someone. We have very little by way of civil rights in general. I just didn't see the point in trying to fight for the specific right of having a gay parade.

The situation is different now. Homophobic laws are being passed in the provinces and the Duma, where gays and lesbians are named in the same breath as pedophiles. The most terrifying thing is that it is not me, a fully-formed person, who will suffer the most from this law, but the children and adolescents for whose safety these laws are ostensibly being created. Now, gay teens will really be made to feel inferior, while homophobes will think they have the moral right. I

don’t want to think about how this will all end.

I have a child now. I think about his future all the time. I worry about him, because right now, they’re discussing depriving gay people of their parental rights, not only for adopted children but also for their own biological children. I don’t think it’s possible that this law will be passed. On the one hand, I don’t want to stick my neck out because I don’t want to attract attention to myself. On the other hand, a public figure is probably safer than an unknown. To be perfectly honest, I don’t know what we’re supposed to do in this situation.

—As told to Karen Shainyan

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NINA & KATYA
"We want to be Mama Katya, Mama Nina, Papa, and lots of kids."

Nina, 33, a psychologist and television producer, and Katya, 30, a tax advisor, are both conventionally attractive, long-haired women. The way they talk, hold hands, and look at one another leaves no doubt about the nature of their relationship. They met two years ago under tragic circumstances. At the end of winter, they plan to wed. But in Argentina, where they'll be traveling to get married, it will be the end of summer. Like many people in love, Katya and Nina dream of having children, but where, how many, and who they will have them with, they've yet to resolve.

NINA

We don't have a romantic story about how we met. It was a tragedy that brought us together in the summer of 2011. A small boat crashed into a large barge on the Moscow River. Over half of the seventeen people on board died. Katya was among the survivors.

KATYA

I was lucky enough to be on the deck, far enough away from the propellers and from where the barge hit to survive. I was rescued. On shore, I met Nina.

NINA

I was with my friends who were related to some of the victims. At first, there was not the slightest thought of romance. I only wanted to support Katya, we'd just become friends. For the first two months, she was in shock, so our relationship was rocky and disjointed. Eventually, the going got smoother and I couldn't even understand what was going on. Why did I want to see her all the time even though almost everything she said got a rise out of me? It was this mixed feeling.

KATYA

For me, the story with Nina began with a phone conversation that lasted four hours and eleven minutes, with our phones taking turns running out of batteries. This was a couple months after we met, in the autumn.

NINA

We hardly went on any regular dates. It was an automobile affair. We spent a lot of time in the car, driving around and talking. I was going through a lot of mood swings. One minute I was dark, the next bright, and in one of my sunny phases I sent her a text that said: "I want everything with you." This is my first romantic relationship with a woman, and I really hope that it's the one I stay in for the rest of my

life. I had experimented with girls, but without any kind of romantic feelings. I needed time to figure things out with Katya, to understand what I felt and what I wanted. As soon as I figured things out, I told my husband everything, got my stuff, and moved out. When I met Katya, I was in my second marriage, and it was a messy break-up with lots of drama. I rented an apartment and was living there alone until Katya moved in with me.

KATYA

I was also in a relationship when we met. I had a girlfriend whom I had been living with for several years. But for me it was simpler. When I realized I was in love, it was clear: there was Nina and there could not be anyone else. In February 2012, we moved in together.

NINA

Right now, we're getting ready for our wedding in Argentina in March. There aren't that many countries where same-sex couples can get married. There's the United States, Canada, Argentina, and I think Uruguay. As soon as we get married, we're going to have children.

KATYA

We don't know where or how. I would like to live at home, of course. Our parents are here, our friends, everything. But considering the level of idiocy going on here, it's unclear whether we'll be able to stay in Russia.

NINA

Right now, there's a town where some parents are trying to take a woman's children away because she's a lesbian and lives with her partner. Considering all that, I don't really want to have kids in Russia. We're considering Nepal, Latin America, or the U.S.

KATYA

We don't want to live in hiding, and it's not just about what we want, it's about what will be good for our kids. I don't go around screaming about my sexual orientation. But my coworkers know, my boss and I are Facebook friends, so everything is out in the open. I work in a large international company. I haven't had any open conflicts because of my lifestyle or faced any kinds of physical threat. But you could always add "yet" to the end of these statements. We'll probably end up having to move to the evil empire of the United States but we don't really want that.

NINA

In the end, our plan also depends on who the father will be because we would like the father to be a part of the child's life. A father is a really important person for both boys and girls. A lot depends on him. Right now we have a few options in Russia and America. Katya and I have a pretty solid relationship, but I think we need a real father with whom we will find a harmonious co-existence.

We want to be Mama Katya, Mama Nina, Papa, and lots of kids. At least two.

KATYA

Or at least two of each.

NINA

If we immigrate anywhere, it will probably be the States. I go there a lot and I really love New York. I speak English, so right now, it's our leading alternative. The most important thing is to take our time, without any rush, impulsiveness, or thinking about what other people will think. This marriage is not just an official legal status; it's important for me to feel like I'm doing everything by the books. Not in the sense of following someone else's rules like in the Soviet Union, but in terms of living according to what I believe is right. I am 33, and I've done many things according to various rules, and now I only want to live by the rules that the two of us make. Katya's opinion is very important to me; I have endless respect for her, even though we don't always understand each other. She's the most mysterious person in the world to me. Right from the start, I truly did not understand her, but I thought she was a completely amazing, magical being. And I still think that.

KATYA

Our relationship is very unusual. We think very differently, but we've come together kind of like a puzzle. I can't even articulate what it is. It's just that Nina is my family, my person. I don't see a need to understand her. I feel her, and everything I need to understand, she'll tell me.

—As told to Karen Shainyan

ANYA & NATA
“Once we’d settled into our relationship, we decided to take up partner dancing.”

ANYA + NATA

Anya lives with her parents, who often go abroad. Their trips provide her and Natasha with the opportunity to live together for short bursts. Anya’s mother is suspicious of the fact that she doesn’t introduce any of her suitors to her parents. However, she refuses to come to terms with the fact that she will never have a son-in-law. Natasha lives with her grandmother, who is kind to Anya but does not suspect that she and her granddaughter are more than just friends. Anya and Natasha met through a fan fiction community on Livejournal. They used to work together at a children’s café, and they’re in the process of making a book together, but their most important project is partner dancing, with a specialty in “West Coast Swing.”

ANYA

Natasha is a great artist. She also loves sweets and is capable of eating a whole cake by herself.

NATA

Overnight.

ANYA

I don't like sweets. Nata cooks for me and I bake for her. We really like to eat.

NATA

And then we go on a diet together. Recently before a festival, Anya says to me: "So, Natasha, we're supposed to dance in a week and we're going to have to fit into our costumes. We have to lose some weight." Anya and I met at a Surganova concert, seven years ago. I was part of a dance collective and I invited Anya to join. That's where it all went down.

ANYA

Once we'd settled into our relationship, we decided to take up partner dancing.

NATA

We saw these two girls dancing together at a party and got really excited about it.

ANYA

Once, we were walking by the Frunzensky Bridge, where every day they play music for anyone who wants to dance. We got next to these people who were doing "Swing Hustle" and started dancing along. Then we found a dance studio for women where they were enrolling new students. We danced there as a couple for a whole year.

NATA

We got into the dance community, where no one cares who you are, where you're from, or who you're sleeping with. They only care that you're on the same wavelength as they are, that you're dancing.

ANYA

They taught us to dance about everything. You can dance about love or about the weather. Whatever you want to dance about, you can do it. It's a free world. This studio was open for another three years, but then there were problems with the space, and enrollment, and then with the law about whatever propaganda, since this was partner dancing for women.

We switched from "Swing Hustle" to "West Coast Swing." It's very fluid, like the sea. It stretches out like a wave.

NATA

It doesn't have end points; it always keeps going. We're not professional dancers for one simple reason: because we don't have the right to compete as a pair.

ANYA

Nata can dance in competitions with other partners, but I can't. I don't exactly remember how I ended up taking the man's part. I probably just wanted the experience.

NATA

Anya likes the male partner's function: he decides what the pair

does. The female half can improvise, but she always follows the male.

ANYA

The male partner structures the dance. He has to think five steps ahead. It's very complicated: you have to consider technique, the music, and the shape of the dance.

NATA

It was very hard for me in the beginning because I was not used to obediently following someone. We even had conflicts, but we've learned to understand one another.

ANYA

Nata follows me. When I see that she's started improvising, I wait and give her time, complementing her movements with my own. It's an art. The tipping point was when I was able to ask another girl who wasn't Nata to dance with me at a club. For a dancer, this is a very important step. You can't always dance with the same partner because it'll make you worse. You won't notice your mistakes. I remember sitting there, afraid. How will I ask another girl to dance with me? What will the girl think of me? But then I saw my teacher and asked her. Since then, I've known that I can dance with anyone. This is a new level for someone who wants to dance professionally.

NATA

Then came the next important stage.

ANYA

I got lucky last year. Nata and I were supposed to perform at a festival. We registered and prepared a new number. Suddenly, Nata ended up in the hospital. I was about to quit, but Natasha convinced me to participate without her.

NATA

Important people come to the festival, such as professional trainers from America and Europe, and give master classes. It's great experience, like studying with a native speaker.

ANYA

I went but I was upset and unsure of myself. I don't remember what got into me, but after a lesson, I decided to go talk to the head judge. I went up to him and asked, "Excuse me, why can't I compete in the man's role?" He looked at me, amazed: "Why not?" Suddenly, a festival volunteer runs up to me and says, "The head judge has allowed you to compete, hurry up and get your number." Slowly, it dawns on me that they're letting me participate despite all the rules against it! I was in such shock, and so euphoric, that I called Nata in the hospital, screaming, "Nata, I'm going to compete!" I changed in a panic. They stick a number on my back. I go out onto the floor. Around me, I see the judges, and the people looking at me—it's all like a dream. I am the only woman in a crowd of male partners.

Suddenly, they're announcing the people who made it to the semi-finals, and I hear my name. I call Nata screaming again. The semi-final happens. I think, "OK, I can relax now." Suddenly, a woman I met at the competition flies at me: "Anya, did you see the results? You're in the finals." I slowly realize that I'm in the finals, in a men's competition. The final shock of the day was that I made it into the top ten in the finals.

NATA

In the top ten on her first try.

ANYA

It's been a year and we haven't been allowed to participate in any other competitions since. In the rules, it says a pair consists of a male and a female partner. But at least they decided in our favor once, and that set an important precedent.

NATA

When you make it to the finals in a prestigious competition, you get an international dance ranking. Your rank is proof of your professional level. Anya should have been ranked, but they didn't do it.

ANYA

Whoever was doing the ranking saw my last name, understood that I was a woman, and didn't take into account that I was a finalist.

NATA

Since then, we've been looking for every opportunity to participate in a competition. We keep growing as dancers no matter what. We go to master classes, learn new dances, but we want professional achievements, too.

ANYA

I've even tried dancing the women's part. However, ever since I've started developing my skills, I've become more interested in leading.

NATA

Last year we tried to learn how to switch roles. It was a very interesting experience. It's good to switch roles because it helps you understand how your partner thinks. We know some male partners and we've started having fun with them. We lead them like they're women, and it helps them pick up important technical habits. I feel very bad for Russian men. They don't even get to be free in the world of dance. If a man dances the woman's part, he immediately falls under a lot of criticism.

ANYA

Incidentally, American men can dance the women's part so well that our girls are jealous of them. They spin and do the kind of pirouettes that not every kind of ballerina could pull off. They're more

open.

NATA

Anya and I deal with our problems and live through dance. The majority of fights we've had over the past seven years have been at rehearsals. There was a time when I was ahead of her in technique. It's a difficult moment for many dancers when one person in a couple starts developing faster than the other, and the other one has to catch up. We were always fighting.

ANYA

But it's like a parallel life for us where we resolve our problems.

NATA

We often think about the future. It's hard to live in Russia when you're like us. We can't get married or have kids or dance together. We can't do anything.

ANYA

When they passed the law on gay propaganda, there were jokes going around on the Internet, like, if a child is raised by a mother and grandmother, does that also count as a same-sex family?

NATA

We laugh, but it's a serious problem. But our society is probably not ready for any of this. We understand that.

—As told to Maria Knyazher

Praise for *Gay Propaganda*

"This book comes at a really important time. There's nothing like putting a human face on the struggle for acceptance and equality. Love conquers all."

—Greg Louganis, quadruple Olympic gold medalist

"The most potent weapon in the fight against anti-LGBT prejudice is the reality of who we are instead of the caricatures presented by our opponents. The bigots who seek to censor our reality by banning 'gay propaganda' understand this. So do Masha Gessen and Joseph Huff-Hannon. Projects like theirs are the most potent weapon in the fight against anti-LGBT prejudice."

—Barney Frank, one of the first openly gay Congressmen in the U.S., retired

"By shining a much-needed light on the common humanity of those brave gay men and lesbians seeking to go about their daily lives in Russia, or those who have made the difficult choice to leave, this book puts the lie to the malicious stereotypes currently being spewed by the Russian government."

—Roberta Kaplan, lead counsel in United States v. Windsor, the Supreme Court case which overturned the Defense of Marriage Act

"Hundreds of straight athletes from around the world have joined the effort to advance LGBT respect and equality. Every one of them will appreciate the importance of this project. This book is much needed and couldn't come at a better time."

—Hudson Taylor and Lia Parifax, founders, Athlete Ally

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Note

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* Names marked with an asterisk have been changed by request of those interviewed.